**Eastern Shoshoni Department of Family Services Review**

**September 15-16, 2014**

Wyoming Citizen Review Panel (WYCRP) partnered with the State of Wyoming Department of Family Services (DFS) to review the Eastern Shoshoni DFS (ESDFS) office on September 15-16, 2014. WYCRP conducted staff, family and stakeholder interviews to compile information about the state of child welfare in the Eastern Shoshoni tribe on the Wind River Reservation in Fremont County Wyoming. The ESDFS office works in cooperation with the Northern Arapahoe DFS (NADFS) office and the local Fremont County DFS offices in Lander and Riverton. While at the ESDFS office there were a total of 7 DFS staff interviews and 6 stake holder interviews.

Fremont County social service agencies have many variables to operations which makes coordination of efforts challenging for services to children and families. For example, there are five DFS offices in Fremont County, include ESDFS Social Services, ESDFS Juvenile Services, NADFS, Fremont County DFS-Riverton location, and Fremont County DFS-Lander location. There are also seven primary law enforcement agencies in Fremont County and 13 school districts. It also further complicates issues with multiple courts and different jurisdictions throughout the county.

Although the ESDFS office’s primary mission is to serve children and families of the Eastern Shoshoni tribe it becomes complicated with coordination of services on the reservation as well as off the reservation. Due to difference in tribal law and order code compared to Wyoming State DFS policy, sometimes there are unresolved questions about how to proceed with specific matters related to child welfare. There are times when it is a question of whose responsibility it is to care for children off of the reservation. These questions are often addressed through the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) but this is often complicated with different interruptions across agencies.

In talking with a variety of individuals it is obvious that services for children and families are complicated by a variety of issues. In spite of that, the efforts of the community reflect that the safety of native children to the ES tribe are a priority both on and off of the reservation.

The following information is reflective of input from the staff of the two ESDFS offices, biological family members who have participated with the local office, 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.

Strengths:

1. Communication within the individual ESDFS offices is very good. They communicate well with the heads of the departments so that they know what their staff is doing.
2. Case loads are manageable for the caseworkers to give adequate time to each family and complete the necessary paperwork. This also allows for caseworkers to complete their monthly face to face visits.
3. Children who are taken into protective custody are having regular medical exams. The IHS clinic is aware of the role of DFS and maintains open communication as necessary.
4. The Juvenile services office participates in a variety of community youth programs which supports efforts to build strong and responsible youth.
5. There is a meth coordinator in the office which leads to a better understanding of substance abuse issues for families involved in the system.

Concerns:

1. The computer systems are having difficulties keeping up with the work demands in the office. Currently in the WYCAPS system, all word processing tools are connected to it which leads to difficulty with work productivity when the system is down a significant amount of time. Staff do not have another means of inputting narrative until the system comes back up. This leads to a significant amount of down time and then files get backed up.
2. Recently the Joint Business Council was dissolved on the Wind River Reservation which is making it difficult to work across tribal agencies.
3. When possible children who are taken into protective custody are placed with family members on the reservation. At times this can be problematic because of multiple families living within one home without adequate resources to meet the child’s needs. There is a lack of native foster families, which may lead to children being placed in unstable environments which have the potential to be of danger or decrease the likely hood of long term permanency. It was reported that children are being removed from some of the “foster” or “kinship” placements due to a variety of reasons and placed in another home, whether it be a different family member or a foster home. This poses a lack of stability for these children.
4. It is reported that there is a lack of communication across multiple stakeholders, especially those off of the reservation. Misunderstanding of roles, responsibilities, jurisdictions and restrictions of individual stakeholders can affect safe outcomes for children in all areas.
5. Multiple community stakeholders suggested the need for an additional investigator at ESDFS. Case file quantities are prohibiting cases from being taken care of in a timely manner.
6. There is difficulty communicating with the state DFS office especially around contract negotiations. Often times there is not an adequate understanding of tribal code which prohibits appropriate language in the contract.

Recommendations:

1. It would be beneficial to have additional WYCAPS training available on an ongoing basis. The creation of a “cheat sheet” would be helpful for new workers when entering data until they are familiar with the system.
2. It would be beneficial to have the capacity to adapt forms to fit the tribal use/language better.
3. Staff would like additional training on substance abuse, specifically what to look for regarding drug use and identification of some drug paraphernalia.
4. It was also requested to have a mandatory reporting training offered to staff, families, and community stakeholders in order to improve understanding of individual responsibility related to child welfare.
5. Domestic violence is common on the reservation so additional training and resources to support individuals in this situation would be beneficial to improve case work.
6. It is recommended for staff to participate in court training related to how the system operates, the necessary paperwork to efficiently move a case forward and delineations of roles between the courts and DFS. The Prosecuting Attorney’s office is working on this currently and will plan to include the ESDFS offices in this effort.
7. Recommend coordinating with the state Foster Care Coordinator to assist with recruitment of foster homes.
8. Recommend further investigation of computer system improvements and the need to have additional software options for word processing outside of WYCAPS.
9. Recommend continued use of the DFS tribal liaison in contract negotiations to improve communication and bridge the gap between the local ESDFS office, the ES Business Council and the state DFS office.
10. The ESDFS office should work in coordination with the state DFS office regarding creating forms that are tailored to native culture.
11. Due to increased movement in placement for children, it is recommended that after placement, either kinship or home, to follow up to ensure the safety plan is in place and the environment is stable before the case is closed. Cases should remain open to complete the process outside of the court case closing.

Summary:

The Eastern Shoshoni DFS office is unique in structure as the social services department is separate to the juvenile services office. This structure requires more intensive communications between to the two departments especially for those transitional youth or for families who have a child in both services. Services in Fremont County can be completed due to jurisdiction issues related to the reservation. It is imperative that there is good communication across agencies to ensure that children and families are receiving all of the services available to best meet their needs. The ESDFS is making efforts to ensure that children are in safe placements and supporting reunification when possible. It would be beneficial for continued communication to occur between the ESDFS office, the state, and the local stakeholders to meet the needs of caseworkers on the reservation. It is obvious that there is a desire to assist families of the Eastern Shoshoni tribe to be successful. It was a pleasure working with the ESDFS offices.