



# **Georgia Child Welfare Reform Council**

## **Final Report to the Governor**

**January 9, 2015**

**Stephanie Blank, Chair**

## Table of Contents

<b>Report</b>	1 — 20
Background	3
Final Council Recommendations	7
Acknowledgements	20
<b>Appendix</b>	1 — 187
Press Release Announcing Establishment of the Council	3
Council Member Biographies	4
Council Meeting Agendas and Minutes	15
Presentations and Research Provided to the Council	37
Subcommittee Reports and Presentations	164
Other Press Releases	187
*Appendix available upon request- <a href="mailto:childwelfarereform@georgia.gov">childwelfarereform@georgia.gov</a>	

## Background

Governor Nathan Deal created the Child Welfare Reform Council to improve Georgia’s child welfare system in order to better protect the state’s most vulnerable citizens. The Council was modeled after the successful Criminal Justice Reform Council, and it completed a comprehensive review of Georgia’s child welfare system. This report contains the Council’s recommendations for how to reform that system.

The purpose of Georgia’s child welfare system is to improve the safety, stability (also known as “permanency”), and well-being of Georgia’s children. Governor Deal established the Council because he saw much room for improvement in all of these areas of child welfare in Georgia.

One of the key challenges to Georgia’s child welfare system is the fact that it can only respond to child abuse or neglect that it knows about, and it only knows about what members of the community report to it. When someone reports an incident of child abuse or neglect to the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), the system is set in motion.

Reports are classified by severity; some are referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) for investigation, and less severe cases are put on the track that is known, in Georgia, as Family Support. CPS investigators determine whether the reported abuse is substantiated or unsubstantiated and, where the abuse is substantiated, DFCS determines whether the situation is so unsafe that the child should be removed to foster care. In Georgia, abuse recurs within 6 months for about 4-5% of cases that were initially referred to either Family Support or CPS Investigation (including both substantiated and unsubstantiated reports).

In the severest cases, CPS removes the child from the abusive caregiver and places him or her in temporary foster care, usually with a non-relative. In 2013, 5,999 children were removed from the care of their parents and placed in foster care; about half of these removals were because of neglect, about a tenth because of physical abuse, about 30% because of parental substance abuse, and about a fifth because of inadequate housing (among other reasons). As of September 30, 2013, 7,676 children were in foster care; 13,675 children were served by the foster care system in 2013, and the median stay in foster care that year was 11.6 months.

Our child welfare system faces major challenges in child safety, permanency, and well-being.

<b>Challenges</b>		
<b>Safety</b>	<b>Permanency</b>	<b>Well-Being</b>
<u>Detecting Child Abuse</u>	<u>Improving Placement Stability</u>	<u>Improving Children’s Lives</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Protective Services can only respond to the abuse it knows about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children in foster care are uprooted too many times, which disrupts their development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Educational achievement</li> <li>• Self-sufficiency in transition to adulthood</li> </ul>
<u>Improving the CPS Workforce</u>	<u>Expediting Permanency</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social workers are overburdened, so they cannot give enough time and effort to each family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It takes too long to get children out of temporary homes and into stable families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family and community connections</li> <li>• Youth engagement</li> <li>• Trauma-informed care</li> </ul>

Because of the urgency of these challenges, Governor Nathan Deal announced the creation of the Child Welfare Reform Council on March 13, 2014.<sup>1</sup> He appointed Stephanie Blank, a longtime advocate for children in Georgia, to chair the Council. A few weeks later, on April 2, 2014, he named the remaining Council members,<sup>2</sup> and they began meeting on May 1, 2014 to determine how to improve our child welfare system in order to better protect Georgia’s most vulnerable citizens.

<b>Members of the Child Welfare Reform Council</b>	
Stephanie Blank, <i>Council chair</i>	Founding Chair, Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS)
Bob Bruder-Mattson	CEO, The United Methodist Children’s Home (UMCH)
Lamar Burkett	Pastor; Foster Parent; Advocate
Melissa Carter	Executive Director, Barton Child Law and Policy Center
Hon. Valerie Clark	State Representative, District 101
Valerie Condit	School Social Worker, Fulton County Schools
Dr. Cheryl Davenport Dozier	President, Savannah State University
Duaine Hathaway	Executive Director, Georgia CASA
Hon. Carolyn Hugley	State Representative, District 136
Donna W. Hyland	President and CEO, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta
Hon. Burt Jones	State Senator, District 25
Hon. Fran Millar	State Senator, District 40
Meredith Ramaley	Detective, Smyrna Police Department
Heather Rowles	Executive Director, Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC)
Hon. Freddie Powell Sims	State Senator, District 12
Judge Steve Teske	Chief Juvenile Court Judge, Juvenile Court of Clayton County
Judge Peggy Walker	Juvenile Court Judge, Juvenile Court of Douglas County
Tyra Walker	Director, WinShape Homes, Chick-fil-a, Inc.
Hon. Wendell Willard	State Representative, District 51
Ashley Willcott	Executive Director, Office of the Child Advocate
Crystal Williams	Former Foster Youth; Founding Member, EmpowerMENT

Council members represent a variety of constituencies in and perspectives on the child welfare system, from judges to foster parents, legislators to advocates, healthcare workers to educators, academics to former foster youth. All brought their insights to bear on the recommendations contained in this report.<sup>3</sup>

This report presents the Council’s recommendations for improvements to the overall system and the delivery of child welfare programs that the Council was created to address. Appended to this report are materials that were

- Press Release Announcing the Establishment of the Council
- Council Member Biographies
- Council Meeting Agendas and Minutes
- Presentations and Research Provided to the Council
- Subcommittee Reports and Presentations
- Other Press Releases

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix at 3 for press release announcement.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix at 187 for press release naming members.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix at 4 for Council members’ biographies.

used or prepared during the course of the Council’s review (listed at right).

During the summer of 2014, the members of the Council heard presentations from and asked questions of scholars, practitioners, and participants in various aspects of the child welfare system.<sup>4</sup> These meetings were video-recorded, and the videos and power point presentations are posted on Governor Deal’s website.

<b>Child Welfare Reform Council Meetings</b>	
May 1, 2014	Remarks by Governor Deal Overview of the Child Welfare System in Georgia Overview of DFCS and Its Current Initiatives
June 12, 2014	The Judicial Process Reasons Behind Caregiver Abuse The Role of the Office of the Child Advocate Personal Perspective from a Former Foster Youth
August 5, 2014	Differential Response Effects of Abuse and Neglect: A Child’s Perspective Georgia Families 360 Program
September 10, 2014	Remarks by Bobby Cagle, Interim DFCS Director Subcommittee Discussions
October 7, 2014	Remarks by Virginia Pryor, Child Welfare Consultant Subcommittee Discussions
November 13, 2014	Subcommittee Presentations to Full Council Full Council Vote on Recommendations

In the first meeting, following introductory remarks by Governor Deal, Melissa Carter of the Barton Child Law and Policy Center gave Council members an overview of the child welfare system in Georgia. Council members also heard an overview of the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), the state agency responsible for most child welfare services in Georgia, by its then-director, Dr. Sharon Hill.

Meeting 2 featured the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders and participants in the child welfare system. Council member Judge Peggy Walker—juvenile court judge in Douglas County and current president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges—informed the Council about the inner workings of the judicial process in child welfare cases, incorporating her opinions on what they should change about that process. Dr. Tanisha Grimes discussed reasons for caregiver abuse, introducing Council members to the perspective of the abusive parent or guardian. Ashley Willcott educated her fellow Council members about the role of the Office of the Child Advocate in Georgia’s child welfare system, the office she currently leads. Finally, Crystal Williams, also a member of the Council, told her own story as an alumna of Georgia’s child welfare system.

At the third meeting, JoAnn Lamm gave a presentation on differential response, the two-tiered model of child welfare used in Georgia. Dr. Jordan Greenbaum gave a presentation on the

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix at 15 for Council meeting agendas and minutes.

effects of child abuse and neglect on children, introducing Council members to the child's perspective. Earlie Rockette informed the Council about the Georgia Families 360 program.<sup>5</sup> After these first few informational meetings, each Council member was assigned to one of three subcommittees based on interests and expertise. These subcommittees were to meet to discuss their ideas for reform in the realms of laws and regulations, personnel, or policies and procedures, and were the source of ideas that ultimately became policy recommendations.

### Child Welfare Reform Council Subcommittees

**Laws and Regulations** – Subcommittee focused on increasing transparency within the system, improving rules governing records in child welfare, and improving the governance structure of the Division of Family and Children Services.

*Members: Hon. Wendell Willard (chair), Duaine Hathaway, Hon. Burt Jones, Judge Steve Teske, Tyra Walker, Ashley Willcott*

**Personnel** – Subcommittee focused on recruiting and retaining social workers, developing a social work career ladder, providing training and continuing education for social workers, and building partnerships between child welfare agencies and law enforcement for safety.

*Members: Donna Hyland (chair), Hon. Valerie Clark, Dr. Cheryl Dozier, Hon. Fran Millar, Meredith Ramaley, Hon. Freddie Powell Sims, Crystal Williams*

**Policies and Procedures** – Subcommittee focused on streamlining and standardizing processes, encouraging the implementation of evidence-based practices that have proven effective across the country, and using predictive analytics to improve Child Protective Services.

*Members: Melissa Carter (chair), Bob Bruder-Mattson, Lamar Burkett, Valerie Condit, Hon. Carolyn Hugley, Heather Rowles, Judge Peggy Walker*

At the fourth Council meeting, held in the fall, the Council members met for the first time with their subcommittees to begin discussing and developing recommendations. They continued meeting together on their own time and at the fifth meeting, and each subcommittee presented its recommendations to the full Council at the sixth and final meeting on November 13, 2014.<sup>6</sup> At that meeting, the Council voted on each of the recommendations. Those that were approved became the Final Recommendations to Governor Deal, and are listed below.

The Council respectfully submits this final report to Governor Deal for his consideration. This report contains the full list of Council-approved recommendations, and represents the culmination of six months of dedicated review and analysis by the Council. Through this report, the Council aims to provide the governor with clear recommendations to assist state leaders in crafting a strategy to address the child welfare system in the manner that best serves Georgia's children.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix at 37 for presentations and research provided to the Council.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix at 164 for subcommittee reports.

## Final Council Recommendations

Below are the Child Welfare Reform Council's final recommendations to Governor Deal. With the exception of the general recommendations, these were developed by the three subcommittees and approved by a vote of the full Council. The recommendations are listed by subcommittee in the following pages, beginning with Laws and Regulations, followed by Personnel, and ending with Policies and Procedures.

Laws and Regulations	8
Personnel	11
Policies and Procedures	16

### ***General Recommendations:***

At the conclusion of the final meeting, Council Chair Blank proposed that the Child Welfare Reform Council continue its work next year. The members of the Council present at the final meeting unanimously agreed upon this recommendation.

The Council recognizes that Georgia's Child Welfare system is already partially privatized. In addition, the Council recommends that DFCS continue to examine additional methods to enhance these elements—such as foster parent recruitment and retention—in order to maximize their cost-effectiveness while at the same time improving safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes.

## **Laws and Regulations Recommendations**

The Laws and Regulations Subcommittee, acknowledging the legal and regulatory challenges facing Georgia's child welfare system, studied DFCS governance, rules about data-sharing and record-keeping, and the possibility of resurrecting a central child abuse registry. The subcommittee determined that the following recommendations would best address these issues.

### **Governance**

#### **1) Local Boards:**

Clarify the purpose, powers, and duties of existing county-level DFCS boards in the statute.

Provide a list of the kinds of people who should be named to these county DFCS boards, including stakeholders such as:

- Pediatric health care providers
- School teachers and administrators
- Emergency responders
- Law enforcement personnel
- Juvenile court judges
- Private child welfare service providers
- Alumni of the child welfare system
- Mental health care providers
- Foster parents
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)
- Leaders within the faith-based community

#### **2) District Advisory Boards:**

Create district-level DFCS advisory boards to bring information from the county-level DFCS boards to DFCS district directors in order to improve communication, service delivery, and application of policy in each district.

Require that these advisory boards meet quarterly with DFCS district directors.



### **3) DFCS State Advisory Board:**

Create a state-level DFCS advisory board with twenty members, including:

- One governor-appointed representative from each of the fifteen DFCS districts, and
- Five governor-appointed representatives from the legislature and/or the fields of:
  - Child Welfare Experts
  - Former Foster Youth
  - Public health
  - Mental health and developmental disabilities
  - Juvenile justice

Charge the advisory board with reviewing and recommending proposed DFCS rules and regulations, but do not give it veto or drafting power. Set forth further specific responsibilities of the state advisory board in legislation.

Require that the advisory board meet at least quarterly. Require that the DFCS Director participate in these quarterly meetings and provide a quarterly report to the advisory board in advance of the meetings.

### **4) DFCS Director:**

Provide that the DFCS Director be appointed directly by the Governor, serve at the pleasure of the Governor, and be answerable to the Governor.

Require that a DFCS director have at least one of the following qualifications:

- Educational background or managerial experience involving work with vulnerable populations, or
- Work experience in a setting dealing with the safety or well-being of children or other vulnerable populations, or
- Experience working in or managing a complex, multidisciplinary business or agency.

### **5) DFCS-DHS Relationship:**

Provide that DHS maintain authority over DFCS with respect to:

- DFCS budgeting and appropriation of funds, which DHS should oversee (with input from the DFCS Director).
- Rules and regulations for the operation and management of DFCS, which the DHS board should ultimately approve.

## Records

### 6) Data Sharing Between Agencies:

Encourage the legislature to review state agencies' ability to share data, and to increase their ability to share data within the confines of federal and state law (including HIPAA). Aim to allow agencies to ascertain a full picture of the services each child is receiving from various state agencies to know how to better serve each child. Consider bidirectional data-sharing for:

- Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS)
- Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)
- Department of Community Health (DCH)
- Department of Public Health (DPH)
- Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DHBDD)
- Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)
- Department of Education (DOE)
- Georgia Crime Information Center (GCIC)

### 7) Custodial Records:

Review the extent to which statutes, rules, or regulations allow DFCS to share children's mental and physical health and conduct records with care providers when those providers need that information to care for the children in their custody.

Promulgate legislation to allow care providers appropriate access to the records relating to children in their care.

## Child Abuse Registry

### 8) Child Abuse Registry:

Conduct research to determine the best statutory scheme to create a child abuse registry within a state agency to maintain the names of those convicted of child abuse and neglect.

Create a child abuse registry for Georgia to keep children safe while also complying with constitutional requirements of due process.

## **Personnel Subcommittee Recommendations**

The Personnel Subcommittee interviewed DFCS leadership and staff to understand their priorities for how to improve working conditions at DFCS. The subcommittee also consulted a survey of the same group conducted by the Georgia Child Protective Services Advisory Committee in 2014, which had identified several areas of opportunity for improvement, including caseload size, safety, compensation, public respect, and technology resources. Based on these survey results and interviews, the Personnel Subcommittee organized its recommendations into three areas of focus (Staff Retention, Training, and Safety) that would address the areas of opportunity identified by the survey.

### **Staff Retention**

#### **9) Caseloads:**

Support Governor Deal's plan to hire enough DFCS staff to achieve a caseload ratio of fifteen cases to one caseworker, and a supervision ratio of five caseworkers to one supervisor.

#### **10) Compensation and Career Path:**

Provide opportunities for DFCS to increase compensation for caseworkers and supervisors to bring it more in line with average salaries for similar jobs. To ensure that children are best served, any salary increases should be based on merit and qualifications, rather than across-the-board.

Determine specific advancement and salary-increase criteria for caseworkers and supervisors. Allow for advancement within each position, such that caseworkers do not need to become supervisors in order to advance in their careers if they prefer being caseworkers.

Consider offering salary increases to those who:

- Obtain additional credentials, or
- Obtain certification in a specific skill area, such as:
  - Intimate partner violence,
  - Substance abuse and addiction,
  - Commercial sexual exploitation of children, or
  - Mentoring and coaching.

**11) Internal Communication:**

Improve internal communication about employee performance and satisfaction.

- Implement employee recognition programs to highlight achievement.
- Conduct employee satisfaction surveys to discover areas that require improvement.

**12) Internal Culture:**

Implement a system similar to the “Just Culture” model, which increases employees’ confidence in their work and reduces fear of retribution for innocent mistakes.

**13) Processes and Technology:**

Partner with Georgia Tech to design processes that simplify administrative work and thereby increase productivity and effectiveness.

Improve the technological tools available to DFCS and its employees, especially in the following ways:

- Improve the SHINES system, especially to ensure that it works more consistently.
- Assess whether mobile technology would increase productivity and effectiveness.
- Provide a caseload management system.
- Leverage information across state agencies, schools, and healthcare.
- Implement predictive analytics.

**14) Practice Model**

Adopt a standard practice model. Train to that model, and design technology to fit it.

## Training

### **15) Title IV-E Student Training:**

Reestablish Georgia's Title IV-E Child Welfare Student Training Program, bringing it into alignment with federal requirements.

Determine how much funding can be generated by participating schools of social work to avoid too much reliance on state funds.

Execute a contract with Georgia State University to handle administration of the program, in collaboration with DFCS.

Recruit students, and implement the program beginning in Fall 2015.

### **16) Supervisor-Mentor Program:**

Develop a mentorship program wherein mentors provide intense, one-on-one support to new and struggling supervisors for a period of about two weeks at a time. Mentors would carry small caseloads of about three supervisors at a time.

Secure approximately \$1.1 million funding for mentor salaries, benefits, and travel costs.

Establish precise job descriptions for mentors, then recruit and hire them.

## Safety

### **17) Panic Button:**

To the extent that resources allow, continue working with Georgia Tech to develop a panic button or similar technology for caseworkers in order to improve their safety in the field and help them to feel secure.

**18) Safety Training:**

Conduct training sessions to teach caseworkers how to verbally deescalate tense crisis situations (such as verbal judo or crisis intervention training).

**19) Law Enforcement Partnerships:**

Increase contact between DFCS staff and law enforcement personnel through meet-and-greets and joint training sessions.

**Additional**

**20) Scorecard:**

Publish a quarterly DFCS Scorecard with information and measures by which the government and the public can track the progress of workforce improvements.

The Scorecard should include the most important measures of agency improvement, including:

- Ratio of caseworkers to cases (target is 1:15)
- Ratio of supervisors to caseworkers (target is 1:5)
- Turnover rate for caseworkers (show change from baseline)
- Turnover rate for supervisors (show change from baseline)
- Staff satisfaction (use annual survey)
- Caseworkers and supervisors efficiency measure

It should also include performance measures collected by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget (OPB) from the child welfare system:

- Number of calls received by the CPS Intake Communication Center
- Number of calls screened out
- Number of CPS investigations conducted
- Number of substantiated abuse/neglect reports
- Percentage of children seen within 24 hours of the report of abuse/neglect
- Number of Family Preservation Cases
- Number of Family Support Cases
- Percentage of children who return home within 12 months of removal
- Percentage of children who suffer subsequent abuse/neglect within 6 months
- Percentage of children who exit foster care and re-enter it within 12 months
- CPS workers: caseloads and turnover rates

**21) Public Relations:**

Develop and implement a statewide public relations campaign to raise awareness about DFCS success stories and encourage community support for DFCS' work.

Bring together people from communities throughout the state who care about the child welfare system to support its goals and staff, and to help educate others on the system.

**22) Public and Private Funding:**

Identify and pursue funding opportunities through federal programs and private organizations (including, for example, the Children's Trust Fund).

To better qualify for such funding, ensure strong accountability for how funds are used, and routinely report progress and deliverables to any funding sources.

## **Policies and Procedures Subcommittee Recommendations**

The Policies and Procedures Committee examined policies and procedures that might be inhibiting positive outcomes for children and families and work satisfaction for DFCS staff. The subcommittee developed the following recommendations based on the expertise of its members, conversations with DFCS leadership, extensive research, and consultation with peer states and local experts. The recommendations are presented according to the primary performance domains for the child welfare system: safety, permanency, and well-being; additional recommendations for improving internal agency processes and public reporting are also included.

### **Safety**

#### **23) Predictive Analytics:**

Conduct thorough research to determine the best model of predictive analytics for application to child welfare practice in Georgia.

Evaluate models based on their potential to improve decisions by DFCS personnel relating to child safety. This includes decisions by DFCS intake staff about whether to screen out reports or assign them to investigation or Family Support, as well as decisions by DFCS caseworkers about how to deal with situations involving children who are in DFCS custody.

#### **24) Family Support:**

Evaluate the Family Support practice and determine, based on that evaluation, whether it should be replaced, changed, or kept as it is.

#### **25) DFCS-School Collaboration:**

Require, instead of merely allowing, that every Child Protective Services (CPS) investigation include contact with the child's school.

Establish permissive limits on data-sharing so that CPS investigators and school officials can exchange appropriate information about a child to improve the child's safety and prevent unnecessary interruptions in the child's education.



## Permanency

### **26) Diligent Search for Relatives:**

Expand the DFCS diligent search policy to require additional steps for a thorough search (such as searching public records) and specify the information that must be collected for any relative (such as name, social security number, address, date of birth, and aliases).

Develop a statewide standardized report so that information about the search for relatives can be filed with the courts in a uniform manner.

Require permanency timelines that honor a child's established bond with non-related caregivers where related caregivers cannot be found within a reasonable time.

Require expedited permanency timelines for young children (seven and under). Discontinue the responsibility for an ongoing search at the time of the permanency planning hearing (nine months after removal) if DFCS has not identified a suitable relative by that time and the child is residing in a stable placement willing and suitable to provide legal and emotional permanency.

### **27) Foster Parent Recruitment and Training:**

Strengthen DFCS efforts to recruit, retain, and support foster parents and respite caregivers by developing robust public-private partnerships, particularly with faith-based and university partners.

Engage university partners to study and evaluate the IMPACT curriculum that DFCS uses to train foster parents. Evaluate the curriculum for its contributions to foster parent retention and positive outcomes for children. Determine whether an alternative would lead to better outcomes on these and other measures.

Clarify DFCS policy regarding ongoing training for foster parents.

Designate a specific person in each county or each region who is responsible for approving training activities, determining training needs, identifying qualified trainers, and tracking training hours (as well as developing processes to accomplish these things).

Restore DFCS support for the annual statewide conference presented by the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia (AFPAG). Support regional trainings and engage local communities to offer creative incentives for training.

**28) Room, Board, and Watchful Oversight (RBWO) Placements:**

Conduct a study of all RBWO placements. Address any gaps in the continuum of care that are identified by the study.

Develop standards for therapeutic foster care providers in order to ensure a common understanding of the resources and benefits they have to offer, which will help DFCS determine whether and how they might fit specific children’s care and placement needs.

## Well-Being

**29) Driver’s Licenses for Older Foster Youth:**

Develop partnerships with the private insurance industry to remove barriers to older youth obtaining driver’s licenses.

## Additional

**30) DFCS Public Reporting:**

Routinely collect and publicly report DFCS performance on the following measures:

- Child fatality measures, specifically including fatalities that occur after agency interventions to reunify or preserve the family;
- Caseload standards for caseworkers, by position and county;
- Use of psychotropic medications, by age of the child, placement setting, and number of medications prescribed;
- Intake and investigation measures, specifically including the time from the report to the agency’s first contact with child and the time from the initial report to closure of the investigation.

**31) Kenny A. Exit Strategy:**

Develop and aggressively pursue an exit strategy for the *Kenny A. v. Deal* foster care class action consent decree to divert funds being spent on that to serve children across Georgia.

Assess reforms resulting from the consent decree, and replicate effective reforms throughout the state.

**32) External Stakeholders:**

Engage external stakeholders systematically in the development of DFCS policy. Inform community members that promoting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children is a shared community responsibility, and that they therefore have the opportunity to provide input into DFCS policy.

Simplify and streamline DFCS policy to make it understandable and allow for consistent application by workers in the field.

**33) Mobile Technologies:**

Use mobile technologies to support caseworkers in the field by improving their access to information and ability to apply policy.

**34) Case Management Database:**

Maintain an efficient statewide case management database that operates without constant interruption in the field, supports DFCS' policy standards, is adaptable to accommodate new legal mandates and best practices, and is aligned with the agency's practice models.

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