

This Report contains activities, systemic findings, and recommendations that must be made available to the public under Maryland Code Family Law Section 5-539.1(c)(2).



MONTGOMERY COUNTY CITIZENS REVIEW PANEL ANNUAL REPORT

July 2022

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BACKGROUND

Mission

Citizen's Review Panel for Children ("Panel") is charged with examining the policies, procedures, and practices of Maryland and Montgomery County agencies to evaluate the extent to which Montgomery County agencies are effectively fulfilling their responsibility to implement the child protection standards.

Responsibilities

The Panel's responsibilities include:

- Evaluating how effective Montgomery County is in protecting its children;
- Reporting the Panel's findings to the Montgomery County Executive, the County Council, the Maryland State Citizens Review Board for Children, and the Maryland State Council on Child Abuse and Neglect;
- Preparing and making available to the public a report summarizing the Panel's activities within sixty days after the end of each fiscal year; and
- Assisting the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services upon request.

Methods

The Panel assesses the policies and procedures from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective.

- Quantity is assessed through review of metrics (intake, assessment, screening, and investigation).
- Quality is assessed through the Panel's examination of policy, practice, and procedures and can include a review of specific cases and evaluations provided by both families and mandatory reporters. The Panel can conduct public outreach and request comment to assess the impact of current Montgomery County policies, procedures, and practices upon children and families in the community, in accordance with 42 U.S.C. 5106a(c)(4)(C).

The Panel's annual findings, which include highlights of success stories as well as areas in which the County could be more effective, are presented to the HHS Director of the Department of Health & Human Services and the Social Services Officer.

Membership

The Panel consists of nine to fourteen members. The Montgomery County Maryland's County Executive appoints seven voting members to the Panel (subject to County Council confirmation), one member is a county resident selected by the State's Citizen Review Board for Children (CRBC), and one member is a county resident selected by the State Council on Child Abuse and Neglect. The Executive may appoint up to five non-voting members to

provide technical and professional advice to the Panel about child protective services. Under the authority of Montgomery County Code Section 27-49A, the County Executive appoints the Chair and Vice-Chair, subject to County Council recommendation. Members serve three-year terms without compensation according to the County Code.

Maryland Code 5-539.2(d) allows members to serve four years and continue to serve until a successor is appointed and qualifies¹.

Members of the Panel for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 include the following individuals.

- Wilma Brier, Voting Member
- Laura Brown, Technical and Professional Advisor
- Laura Coyle, Voting Member
- Kathleen Dunn, Voting Member
- Kay Farley, CRBC Representative
- Marci Roth McCoy, Technical and Professional Advisor (Chairperson for FY 2019 - FY 2021)
- Stacey McNeely, Voting Member (Chairperson for FY 2022)
- Ronald Whalen, Voting Member

Efforts are currently underway to recruit new members to fill five vacancies.

Scope

The Citizen's Review Panel scope includes monitoring the effectiveness in implementation of state and county child protection standards.

While the Citizen's Review Panel has synergies with other Boards, Committees, and Commissions of Montgomery County Maryland, it differs from them in its narrower subject scope (on child protection) and duty scope (the monitoring of agencies' effectiveness in implementing the child protection standards). The Panel can monitor the Department, the Board of Education, law enforcement, and other entities in their implementation of child protection standards. When the Panel reaches out to other Boards and Commissions, it does so with the intent of gathering information about the efficacy of certain local agencies child protection practices that other Boards and Commissions may have better insight.

The Panel is distinguished from the local County CRBC for minor children in out-of-home care referred to in Maryland Code 5-540 through 5-546 as an independent advisory board. The Panel is also distinguished from the State CRBC, which is charged with evaluating Maryland's child protective services and making recommendations for systemic improvement. Although CRBC is housed within the Maryland Department of Human Services organizational structure, it is an independent entity overseen by its State Board.

¹ There is a conflict between the state statute and county code on the length of terms for Panel members.

The Panel is not a decision-making body. It is advisory in nature. As such, the Panel does NOT direct changes in funding for the agency, establish policy for implementation, determine which programs should be implemented, plan new strategies for the agency, determine priorities for the agency, or provide information to the public. The Panel works with the Commission on Children and Youth (“Commission”) to amplify their recommendation for procedures, programs, or legislation deemed necessary to promote the well-being of children, youth, and families in the community. The Panel supports the Commission’s task of coordinating services between and among agencies serving children and youth in a manner that protects children from abuse and neglect. The Panel may ask for specifics about particular child protection cases or ask specifics on Department practices, but the Panel does not develop new procedures or teach the Department how to effectively practice the policies and procedures.

The Panel monitors the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Department’s policies, procedures, and practices.

State Board and Local Oversight

The Panel meets monthly with staff from the Department of Health and Human Services (“Department”) to monitor the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Department’s policies, procedures, and practices.

The State of Maryland’s State CRBC is obligated under Maryland Code Family Law Section 5-539(b)(1) to train the “Panel”. The Panel, equipped with knowledge of State standards and priorities, then reviews Montgomery County’s response to child abuse and neglect and monitors Montgomery County’s out-of-home care policies, procedures, and practices.

The Panel provides the Montgomery County Executive and Council with information as to how well Montgomery County is performing compared to the state and national average (accounting for resources and population).

OVERVIEW OF FY 2022 ACTIVITIES

In FY 2022, the Panel continued work on two policy areas identified by the Department of Health and Human Services in FY 2021 for which the agency would benefit from an independent review. The two policy areas were the recruitment and retention of resource families and services for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender Questioning, Intersex (LGBTQI) foster youth. The Panel also reviewed agency statistics and operations as a component of the monthly meetings. In addition, the Panel worked with two other county panels to plan and host a community forum. Finally, the Panel undertook efforts to address challenges facing the Panel and to identify how the Panel could improve fulfilling its mission.

Recruitment and Retention of Resource Families

Methods of Review

Building on the Panel's information gathering and research in FY 2021 about the agency's current policies and procedures, the Panel developed a survey to send to existing resource families in Montgomery County in March/April 2022. In the development of the survey, the Panel also sought input from the Montgomery County Foster Parent Association (FPA) with regard to the questions to be asked.

Questions included in the survey address the following issues.

- Level of engagement of the resource family in case planning and implementation
- Adequacy of information provided about the child at time of placement
- Availability of support when problems arise
- Engagement with birth families
- Financial assistance
- Training provided

There were 49 foster families who responded. Based on the survey responses, the Panel is developing a draft executive summary of the survey findings for Ms. Lisa Merkin, Child Welfare Services Administrator, and for the President of the FPA. Issues addressed in the executive summary will include the following.

- Communication with the youth social worker and resource social worker
- Responsiveness of staff
- Inclusion in decision-making
- Financial support
- Relationship with birth parents
- Training

Recommendations

The Panel has not completed its work on this policy issue but has made the following recommendations to the agency thus far.

- Share recruitment information on community and neighborhood listservs and other social media platforms.
- Explore the development of a comprehensive welcome packet for new foster parents in conjunction with FPA.
- Consider developing a confidential complaint process to facilitate resource homes reporting of concerns.
- Consider FosterClub as a resource for possibly training resource home families on dealing with older youth.

Potential Follow-up Actions to Gather More Information

In the coming year, the Panel has discussed additional activities;

- Develop a process for foster parents to express concerns or make complaints,
- Explore barriers to establishing an expedited licensing process for relatives of foster youth, and
- Examine whether an adequate number of resource homes exist for all age levels.

LGBTQ Foster Youth

Methods of Review

In FY 2021, the Panel reviewed the DHS/SSA policy, *Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth and Families* [SSA-CW #18-13 (revised)]. Based on this revised policy, the Panel developed a survey to assist the Panel in understanding whether the agency's policies and procedures follow the revised policy, to gain a broad sense of how the needs of students identifying as LGBTQI are being met, and how the Panel members could support the office staff in meeting the needs of these students.

In September 2021, the staff of the Montgomery County Child Welfare Services office participated in a qualitative survey developed by the Panel. Based on the survey responses, staff are aware of and follow all mandates, specifically according to the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) and other mandates and policies that apply.

A draft executive summary of the survey findings has been prepared by the Panel for Ms. Lisa Merkin, Child Welfare Services Administrator. Issues addressed in the executive summary include the following.

- Communication with the youth and others in the youth's life
- Advocacy on behalf of the youth
- Safety of the youth
- Tracking student identification status
- Compliance with policy and procedures
- Education of staff
- Team support for staff

Recommendations

The Panel is still gathering information on this issue and has made no recommendations thus far.

Potential Follow-up Actions to Gather More Information

In the coming months, the Panel will finalize the executive summary and develop recommendations for the agency.

Agency Operations

Methods of Review

For each Panel meeting, the agency provides the Panel with a child welfare report that includes the following data elements;

- Number of calls to the screening unit,
- Number of new alternative response investigations (in-home services),
- Number of new information and referral investigations (in and out of home services),
- Number of new non-CPS requests (requests for services received from other agencies),
- Number of new out of home placements (entries)
- Number of children who left care (exits)
- Number of children in foster care
- Number of children placed with relatives
- Number of children in residential placements
- Number of families receiving in-home services,
- Number of resource homes,
- Number of resource home applications, and
- Number of resource homes closed.

The Panel reviews and discusses the caseload trends with the agency staff.

The agency's monthly report also includes information on general operations. This past year, many of the updates and discussion focused on the agency's challenges and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, social worker and supervisory staff vacancies, the agency's efforts to engage and train biological parents and resource home families to co-parent while working toward reunification, and the agency's efforts to address racial disproportionality and racial equity. These reports on data and operational issues keep the Panel current and assists the Panel in determining future priority issues on which the Panel should focus its attention and resources.

Additionally, agency staff provided an overview of the agency's Transition Youth Services to the Panel at the March 8, 2022 meeting.

Recommendations

The Panel has asked for an additional data element as part of the monthly meetings related to the number of voluntary placements.

Given the additional stress staff continue to experience because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Panel recommended offering an education session for agency staff. The panel planned

and hosted a virtual session on March 15, 2022. Dr. Doretha Williams, Director of the Center for the Digitization and Curation of African American History with the National Museum of African American History and Culture, spoke about the importance of documenting, preserving, and digitizing African American family and community histories. Over 50 staff were in attendance.

Potential Follow-up Action

Hopefully, in the coming year, the Panel will be able to plan and offer another education or wellness session for staff.

Panel Collaboration with Other County Panels

In collaboration with the Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Advisory Council (AODAAC) and The Mental Health Advisory Committee (MHAC), the Panel assisted in the planning and implementation of a community virtual forum, *Break the Taboo: A Forum on Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder*, on May 19, 2022.

The Panel is also beginning to discuss a possible collaboration with the Montgomery County Board of Social Services regarding increasing mental health support capacity for youth in the foster care system

Panel Challenges in FY 2022

Term limits and resignations resulted in five vacant positions in FY 2021. Term limits and vacancies were posted on the County website three times thus far in 2022. While one new member joined the Panel in FY 2022, an existing member resigned. Filling the positions will allow the Panel to be more productive and effective.

In FY 2022, the Panel will be reaching out to the State Council on Child Abuse and Neglect regarding appointment of a county resident to the Panel, reconnecting with the Commission on Children and Youth, and consider ways to reach out to other entities in the county involved in child protection.

Panel Opportunities for Improvement

The Panel approached the State CRBC to inquire about the training that is available for new Panel members. State CRBC confirmed that it will provide background/resource materials to new Panel members, invite new Panel members to CRBC's pre-service training sessions, and invite all Panel members to all CRBC's in-service training sessions.

