

Ensuring DFPS' Data System Meets Federal Standards

Key Takeaways:

- State efforts to improve child welfare have been hampered in part due to antiquated IT systems at DFPS. These IT challenges can result in the agency losing data about children -- sometimes causing the children themselves to be misplaced – and negatively impacting agency performance.
- While the DFPS LAR contains exceptional items to update its existing data system (“IMPACT”), this would only serve to temporarily duct tape together a flawed system that no longer complies with federal law. Soon to be one of just five states not in compliance, Texas is forgoing a federally funded reimbursement rate of 50% (or higher, depending on robustness of the system).
- Instead of putting more money into an obsolete system, the state should invest in a comprehensive and modern data infrastructure that can help the agency better serve Texas children for years to come. Converting to a CCWIS system (see below) would improve child welfare services and bring the state into compliance with federal law.

Background:

Since 2011, the state has been involved in continuous federal litigation regarding its child welfare services in which our current system was found unconstitutional. Among the challenges identified in this litigation are "inherent problems with DFPS's outdated IMPACT [data] system [that] further impede caseworkers' ability to review important electronic case file information" and that "IMPACT does not currently have the functionality for uploading most documents, such as birth certificates, school records, legal documents, medical, dental, developmental and psychological evaluations or the capacity to store these documents." Built in 1996 based on 1993 guidelines, IMPACT is both not federally compliant nor serving the needs of the agency or vulnerable Texas children. It is time to move to a comprehensive Child Welfare Information System, or “CCWIS,” which is the new federal standard for child welfare systems.

Proposed Action:

Include in the base budget a placeholder rider and budgetary amount to fund a comprehensive overhaul of the DFPS case management system. Consider appropriating these funds either directly to DFPS or to the Technology Improvement and Modernization Fund, created under HB 4018 (87-R), for future action by the Joint Oversight Committee on Investment in Information Technology Improvement.

Budget Cost Estimate:

We estimate a \$75 million placeholder based on similar system overhauls in Oregon, which cost \$74 million with all contractors, state personnel costs, and other ancillary costs included.

Public Policy Impact:

Implementing a CCWIS will improve efficiency and collaboration across entities including courts, Medicaid, educational institutions, and other service providers and stakeholders that require timely access to quality data. Correct and accessible data is imperative for decision-making necessary to better care for Texas' children. CCWIS' modular structure will also ensure that system maintenance and upgrades are not cost prohibitive and do not disable the system and will ultimately provide the state more favorable reimbursement from the federal government.