

**Minnesota Citizen Review Panels
Minnesota Department of Human Services
Independent Living Skills Case Reviews
Final Report**

November 18, 2005

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Minnesota Citizen Review Panels and the Minnesota Department of Human Services Independent Living Skills Case Reviews – Final Report

Purpose of the Case Reviews

Minnesota Citizen Review Panels reviewed cases to determine how county social service agencies addressed the Independent Living Skills (ILS) needs of youth age 16 or older in long-term foster care; how those services were documented; and if the youth who aged out of foster care felt that services provided prepared them for independent living.

Information gathered from the case reviews will be used by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to develop policies and strategies to help youth transition from foster care to independence including:

- Independent living skills curricula for workers
- Independent living skills curricula for foster parents
- Independent living skills best practice guide
- Policies and legislative recommendations
- Department of Human Services child and family services reviews
- Adolescent transition web site
- Transition planning with housing

It is expected that the individual county panels will use the information they gathered in their respective counties to make modifications on how to best serve youth transitioning from foster care to independence in their communities.

Timeline

Department staff introduced the Independent Living Skills case review project to the panel members at their April 2005 meetings. All panel members received an orientation to the case review process, training on interview skills and an overview of the case review forms at their May 2005 Citizen Review Panel meetings. In June, they received their cases and conducted the reviews throughout June and July. The panel members debriefed their cases with their colleagues at the August 2005 meetings. The information was tabulated and evaluated by Department staff.

Review Teams and Cases Reviewed

Collectively, all four Minnesota Citizen Review Panels reviewed 25 cases. With the exception of one case, teams of two panel members reviewed the cases:

- Chisago County – 5
- Ramsey County - 7
- Washington County - 8
- Winona County – 5

In Chisago, Washington and Winona Counties, all of the cases that fit the selection criteria were reviewed. In Ramsey County, due to the large number of cases that fit the case selection criteria, and based on the number of panel members available to review the cases, a sample of the available cases was selected. Those cases in Ramsey County that had recently been reviewed

Review Teams and Cases Reviewed (continued)

administratively or in court were pulled from the sample; and from those cases, seven were randomly selected for this review.

Case Review Selection Criteria

Both open and closed cases that met the following criteria were included in the case reviews:

- Adolescents 16 or older in long-term foster care or in out-of-home-placement for more than one year as of July 1, 2003,
- Cases that were active during the period under review July 1, 2003 to June 30, 2004,
- One child per family/case for purposes of the review.

Ages of youth at time of case reviews:

Ages of youth range from 18 to 21.

Number of cases reviewed:	25
Number of cases in which workers were interviewed:	24
Number of cases in which foster parents were interviewed:	19
Number of cases in which youth were interviewed:	12
Number of youth interviewed who were living independently:	7

Method Used to Review Cases

The reviewers read the agency's case file and then interviewed the worker. If they were able to contact the foster parents, they interviewed them as well as the youth. In some cases, the panel members interviewed mental health care workers and other contracted ILS service providers. The reviewers used nine exploratory issues to help them decide what information to look for in the files and in their interviews.

The team members completed the Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Independent Living Skills Case Reviews form for each case. The form is divided into two items. Item I measures, "Compliance with Required Forms." Item II measures, "Assessment of Independent Living Skills Needs and Provision of Services." Upon completing the information requested on this form, reviewing the paper file, and interviewing those involved in the cases, the reviewers rated each item as strength or as an area needing improvement.

Seven youth who had aged out of foster care and were currently living independently were interviewed using the prepared Citizen Review Panel Former Foster Care Youth, Post-discharge Questionnaire.

Case Ratings

Based on the results of the case file reviews and interviews, the 25 cases were rated as follows:

- **Item I: Compliance with Required Forms**
Strength – 10 cases Area Needing Improvement – 15 cases
- **Item II: Assessment of ILS Needs and Provision of Services**
Strength – 15 cases Area Needing Improvement – 10 cases

What Worked Well – Strengths

Support provided:

The youth benefited from long-term, consistent support while in foster care and after leaving foster care. Individual comments of the reviewers related to services are below.

- Child has been in long-term placement with a supportive, caring, consistent adult, who she calls mom, since the age of three.
- The foster family is still very actively encouraging her and makes it their practice to be forever family, with or without the formality of adoption.
- Everything has been great. I love living here and I have many opportunities. Helps me with a lot of stuff that I am going through now (foster child).
- The foster parents and the county have done, and continue to do, an excellent job preparing this vulnerable young adult to live independently.

Communication and coordination:

Frequent contact and good communication among the worker and the youth and foster parent is important to successfully prepare for independent living. The individual comments from the reviewers below indicate it is helpful when they work as partners.

- Everyone works well together – good team! The worker took my calls weekly. She was there when I needed her (foster mother).
- The worker was great. She met with the child all of the time. She listened to her, she helped her make plans and she was interested in her life. She even took her to job interviews (foster parent).
- Everyone we spoke with regarding this case indicated that this was a successful partnership [youth, county and foster parents]. The youth is attending college, working and has continuous contact with her foster family.
- The worker is supportive. He comes to visit the child once a month and spends time with him. The county paid additional money for extra classes to help the child deal with his attention deficit disorder (foster parent).
- Most of the youth who were no longer in foster care reported that they were satisfied with their foster care experience and with the helpfulness of their social workers and foster parents.

What Worked Well - Strengths: Communication and coordination (continued):

- The county did a good job organizing the file and the paperwork. I was impressed with the level of services provided for this child and with the knowledge, the worker had about the case, despite not having the case very long.
- The coordination of services and efforts of the worker are very impressive. The county identified needs and offered many services, but the youth consistently declined them.
- Very good case notes and referrals provided for the client.
- ILS Plan in the file – excellent. Many ILS services offered and provided. There is good support from the foster parents and the social worker.

Documentation:

With the exception of the first comment cited below, the reviewers were impressed with clear, concise and extensive documentation of the ILS services provided. In all cases below, they were impressed with the outcome of the ILS services provided.

- One case review related that although there was no written plan, the social worker, foster parent and youth worked closely together to assure that the youth would be well prepared for independent living.
- An excellent ILS Plan is in the file, but because it was not signed by the worker. Item I had to be rated as an area needing improvement. The child had signed it.
- There was documentation that a plan existed and extensive skills assessments were done through Therapeutic Support Associates on multiple occasions - worker documented follow-up.
- Each area in which there was an identified need, services were provided and these services were appropriate for the need. It appeared the social worker and foster parents really took the time and made the effort to get to know the youth and to understand his needs along with his tendencies, and served him in a way he was open to being served. Furthermore, the worker and the foster parents maintained open communication. The youth agrees that his ILS needs were addressed.
- Overall, there is evidence of solid attention paid to addressing the client's independent living needs. We were impressed with the work of each of the professionals we interviewed (adult mental health worker, child welfare worker and contracted case manager).

Reviewer's impressions regarding youth:

The comments from the individual cases below illustrate that not all youth respond or have the same independent living skills needs. It is important to look at each case individually.

- The youth is now a 19-year-old, and due to special needs, may choose to continue to live in her current foster home until she is 21. Her foster parents are very supportive.
- The youth is very independent and can make appropriate plans for herself. She is good at creating her own support group.
- Most of the youth who had left foster care said they were living with friends or relatives and not completely independent. They appeared to have safe housing for the present time.

Concerns – Areas Needing Improvement

Support needed:

In many of the individual cases they reviewed, the reviewers noted the following needed services for youth in transition.

- Youth need more concrete direction with money management, time management and college applications.
- Most of the youth who were no longer in foster care reported that no one helped them with housing, health information and health insurance.
- A foster parent's main concern is that these children have nobody when they exit the system and often this leads to the foster parents assisting financially.
- Youth needed more help with finding available educational financial aid.
- Youth, foster parent and worker all expressed a need for supports to continue until the youth turns 21. College immediately after high school is not for everyone, yet youth are pressured to go to school so their supports do not end.
- Persons interviewed reported that youth transitioning from foster care to independence need:
 - Accessible housing.
 - Some sort of transitional housing for youth who need independence with support. Youth need to have a diagnosis, be pregnant or be on a waiting list for Public Housing, which just puts them into another system. So many adolescents want to live on their own but it is so expensive. The part or full time jobs at \$7.00 or \$8.00 an hour are not enough (worker).
 - “Start-up” money for housing, school. Funds available to send child off to school
 - “Second chances” for youth who have aged out or originally refused services. Mentally ill children may need second chances.
 - Help for youth that decide not to go on in school and call later. Currently there is not much the worker can do.
 - Financial assistance. Most of the youth who were no longer in foster care reported not having enough money at least some of the time.
- There needs to be more one-on-one contact between the youth and the worker.
- A youth thought it would be helpful if he had connected with a slightly older person who had experienced the foster care system.
- A job coach and job shadowing could be helpful.
- Many reviewers suggested a support group of youth in transition to help each other through the process.
- Provide a support group of adolescents with a trained facilitator.

Communication and Coordination:

Regular communication among the worker, youth and foster parent appears to be important to successfully plan for and support youth with independent living skills. Frequent contact with the worker is necessary as reflected in the comments made by the individual cases reviewed below.

- There was an inconsistency with service providers. This youth had four different probation officers and two or three social workers.

Concerns – Areas Needing Improvement: Communication and Coordination (continued):

- There seemed to be a disconnect between the child protection and financial workers.
- The foster parents and the youth did not have a copy of the ILS Plan. There needs to be more solid coordination and communication among intra and interagency people dealing with the ILS of the youth.
- Consequences for providers, other than the county child welfare agency, should be defined if they do not follow through with an independent living skills plan.
- I wish the county were more involved with kids in foster care. (youth)
- Another youth mentioned that the one thing he would have liked would be to have more contact or time to talk with his social worker.
- There was miscommunication regarding grants for college and Medical Assistance. Deadlines for applications were missed.
- The youth must sign all contracts made with them. If decisions are made about them, they should at least read and initial (for example – a summary discharge).
- The foster parents and the youth would have found it beneficial to be alerted to when the youth's Medical Assistance benefits expired. They would also have appreciated more assistance with financial aid options for college

Medical Assistance:

Medical Assistance is important for youth in foster care and after they leave foster care as noted by persons interviewed below.

- There should have been a way to prevent the loss of Medical Assistance eligibility.
- Any earnings young adults earn work against them in keeping Medical Assistance. So many times children who have aged out do not have health insurance. Many of them need medications to get through their daily lives (worker).
- Why does a youth lose Medical Assistance if they work?

Independent Living Skills Plans:

It is imperative that ILS Plans include input from the youth and that these plans be shared with the foster parents. The reviewers and persons interviewed also noted that the ILS Plans must meet the needs of individual youth, that the progress made on the plans be documented and the plans should be updated as needed.

- There should be a formal ILS Plan that each party addresses and signs off on in the file.
- Youth should have “buy-in” to the ILS Plan rather than telling them what they must do.
- The county should follow through with youth and foster parents to make sure the ILS Plan is being implemented. If the county cannot do this, they should contract for ILS, make sure they are kept informed and record the progress of the ILS plan in the file. Some ILS plans appeared to address the current situation and an immediate plan for living rather than a plan to help the youth prepare for the future.
- The case plan and the ILS Plan need to be updated.
- Incentives could be offered to attend ILS classes and for passing them. (Savings bonds for completing money management classes.)
- The ILS plan in the file looked good but the results could not be found in the file.

Concerns – Areas Needing Improvement: Independent Living Skills Plans (continued):

- There should be a main case manager with a team approach to providing needed ILS services.
- There needs to be more workers who specialize in ILS and workers need to have fewer cases.
- There was not enough information in the file to determine if the plan was ever followed up on, or if services were not provided because the youth refused them or they were not offered.
- Independent Living Skills Plans should begin at age 15 so the child will start thinking about the future (emotional age and mental health issues should be considered).
- SELF classes might work better if aimed at 14 and 15 year olds.

Transportation:

According to the comments by the reviewers below, barriers to getting a driver's license for youth in foster care is a concern that needs to be addressed.

- Liability of the foster parents or group home and the high cost of car insurance are barriers to youth getting a driver's license.
- Youth said he wants to be more independent and does not like to have to ask for rides to work and other places.

Aging out of foster care:

Most youth are not ready to leave foster care at age 18. The three comments from cases reviewed below express this.

- Youth need to be able to see a need and reasons to stay in the system after they are 18 years old. They need to have reasons and permission to maintain connections beyond 18 years old.
- The county is beginning to acknowledge children are not ready to age out of the system at 18 (worker).
- This child is not like some others who are 18 years old. He seems like a younger kid. He is not ready to live on his own and I do not want him to. I want him to stay here until he is ready (foster parent).

Training:

According to the comments from individual cases reviewed below, the reviewers stated that workers and foster parents need more training in ILS services.

- A generic curriculum would help social workers ensure the youth get the skills they need when they age out of foster care.
- More training for ILS social workers.
- Improve training for foster parents so they can follow through with ILS at home.
- More training and application of the training for foster parents on how to transition an adolescent into the adult world. They see the teen daily and can have a bigger impact (worker).

Findings and Recommendations:

Finding: Reviewers noted there were positive outcomes when workers took the time to get to know the youth and thoroughly assessed their independent living skill needs.

Recommendations: Adolescent program staff should promote and support the use of the Ansel Casey Life Skills Assessment as a precursor to developing the Independent Living plan and recommend it be included in the Minnesota Child Welfare Training System (foster parent and worker training), the *ILS Best Practices Guide* and the Adolescent Transition Web site.

Finding: The case reviewers found that there was often confusion among the foster parent, the county worker, and other service providers regarding who was primarily responsible to develop the plan, and who was responsible to teach the youth various components of the Independent Living Plan.

Recommendations: The *ILS Best Practices Guide*, ILS curriculum and the foster parent curricula should be amended to clarify responsibility within the Independent Living Plan for its various components.

Workers need to differentiate the case plan from the Independent Living Plan by completing Independent Living Plans that focus on preparing youth for emancipation and independent living.

The department's Adolescent Services staff and the Quality Assurance Program staff should work more closely to ensure independent living skills are adequately assessed, documented and provided in cases involving youth in transition.

Finding: Compliance with case plan, SSIS ILS Plan documentation, and forms was rated as needing improvement in 64 percent of the cases reviewed.

Recommendations: The Adolescent Services staff should review and clarify the requirements for counties to articulate why they are required, and what might happen if the requirements are not met. Include that information in the ILS training for county social workers.

Finding: Youth were often without medical coverage after exiting foster care and there appeared to be a disconnection between county social services and county financial services.

Recommendation: A county social worker should accompany the youth in meeting with a county financial worker to apply for medical coverage and other benefits available to the youth when he reaches 18 and/or are no longer in foster care.

Findings and Recommendations (continued):

Finding: Workers, foster parents and even one youth in foster care said that most youth are not ready to live on their own at age 18.

Recommendations: For youth who have reached 18, the Adolescent Services Unit and other Child Safety and Permanency Division staff should develop a white paper that would support a requirement of a judicial determination that a child is capable of living independently before the county can close the child's case. Before the case could be closed the court would be assured that the youth had housing, medical coverage and a job, job training or plans for post-secondary involvement upon leaving foster care.

The need for more specialized training and support for foster parents to help youth gain independent living skills was identified as a priority by the reviewers. Adolescent services staff should investigate options for creating a specialty licensure or certification with fiscal incentives for foster care providers who specialize in transitioning youth out of care.

Finding: Barriers exist for youth in foster care who want to get a driver's license. The ability to obtain a driver's license is an important step towards independence and a normal part of growing up.

Recommendation: The Adolescent Services Unit should research what other states have done to address this and share the findings/solutions with counties and private agencies, and the issue of how to deal with the liability and insurance needs of youth in foster care who need a driver's license. The research will include what other states have done to address this and share the findings/solutions with counties and private agencies.

Appendices follow.

Appendix One - Charts

Chart I identifies the cases reviewed in each county.

	Chisago	Ramsey	Washington	Winona	Total
Cases Reviewed	5	7	8	5	25
Youth Interviewed	2	5	4	1	12
Foster parents interviewed	3	7	7	2	19
Social workers interviewed	5	7	8	4	24

Chart II displays the age and gender of the youth represented in the review.

REPORTED AGE OF YOUTH BY COUNTY					
	Chisago	Ramsey	Washington	Winona	Total
Cases Reviewed	5	7	8	5	25
18	1	3	2		6
19		2	3	2	7
20	3	2	3	2	10
21	1				1
GENDER BY COUNTY					
	Chisago	Ramsey	Washington	Winona	Total
Male	3	3	6	4	16
Female	2	4	2	1	9

Chart III displays compliance with required forms.

To rate this item as strength the ILS plan must be in the file and signed by both the worker and the youth.

Rating 1: Compliance with plan requirements				
	Chisago	Ramsey	Washington	Winona
Cases Reviewed	5	7	8	5
ILS plan in file	2	5	4	4
ILS plan on SSIS	0	1	0	0
ILS plan signed by youth	2	3	3	3
ILS plan signed by worker	1	4	4	3
Number needing improvement	4	4	5	2
Number strength	1	3	3	3

Chart IV displays the compliance with the requirement to assess needs and provide services.

To rate this item as strength, at a minimum, all of the areas to be addressed under identified needs must be addressed and needed services provided.

Rating 2: Identified needs addressed				
	Chisago	Ramsey	Washington	Winona
Cases Reviewed	5	7	8	5
Number needing improvement	0	3	4	3
Number strength	5	4	4	2

Chart V shows the current living arrangement of the youth discharged from care. (Records in 19 of the 25 cases reviewed indicated the current living arrangement.)

Living Arrangement	Number of living arrangements
With friends	6
With other relatives	8
With spouse	3
Other (group home for people with developmental disabilities)	2

Chart VI shows the level of preparedness for independent living.

This information is taken from interviews with the youth regarding their views of the level of preparedness.

LEVEL OF PREPAREDNESS								
	Job	Money	Health	Housing	Trans- portation	Finding resources	Parenting*	Living on own
Very prepared	3		3	3	5	3		4
Somewhat Prepared	3	2	3	2	1	2	3	2
Not very well prepared	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Not prepared at all		3		1		1		
Total	7	7	7	7	7	7	4	7

Chart VII shows the problems youth reported since leaving care.

PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED SINCE DISCHARGE							
	Having enough money	Problem finding a job	Problem finding housing	Finding medical Care	Making friends	Problems With family	Problems with transportation
All the time	3	1					
Most of the time							1
Some of the time	2	2	2	3	2	3	3
Never	2	4	5	4	5	4	3

Chart VIII shows the youth's level of agreement that they were satisfied with their foster care experience and their social workers.

LEVEL OF SATISFACTION			
	Satisfied with foster care experience	Social worker was helpful	Foster parents were helpful
Very strongly agree		1	2
Strongly agree	2	4	2
Agree	2		1
Neither agree or disagree		1	
Strongly disagree	1		1
Very strongly disagree	2	1	1

Chart IX shows who the youth said helped them get ready for independent living.

WHO HELPED							
	Job training	Finding a job	Job interviewing	Housing	Health information	Health insurance	Public assistance
Social Worker	2		1		1	2	4
Foster Parent	1	2			1		
ILS group			2				
Relative			2	1			
Friend			1	1			
School		1					
No one	4	4	1	5	5	5	3

Appendix Two -The Four Counties

Chisago County

Chisago County is located in east-central Minnesota. Center City, its county seat, is approximately 40 miles northeast of the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. It is part of the seven county metropolitan area. The Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that the population of Chisago County in 2002 was 44,780, and it ranking 20 among the 87 counties. In 2000, the minority population of Chisago County was 3.6 percent. According to the Minnesota Department of Administration's report, *Minnesota Milestones, Measures that matter*, the median family income for 2000 was \$57,335.00.

According to Minnesota Department of Human Services data, Chisago County Health and Human Services assessed 225 reports of alleged child maltreatment in 2003. Of those, 45 determinations of maltreatment were made in 92 alleged traditional assessments; one hundred and thirty three assessments were Family Assessment Response.

The three sources cited as references for the years 2000 through 2003 demographics and statistics in Chisago County were the same references used for Ramsey, Washington and Winona Counties.

Ramsey County

St. Paul, the capitol of the State of Minnesota, is the county seat of Ramsey County. In 2002, the population of Ramsey County was 514,748. It has the second largest population of the 87 counties in Minnesota. In 2000, the minority population of the county was 24.7 percent and the median family income was \$57,747.00. Ramsey County Human Services Department assessed 1,329 reports of alleged child maltreatment in 2003. Of those, 850 were assessed traditionally and 600 of those were substantiated maltreatment. Four hundred and seventy nine assessments were Family Assessment Response.

Washington County

Stillwater, the county seat of Washington County, is located just east of the Twin Cities, about 23 miles. The population of Washington County in 2002 was 210,724. It ranks fifth in population of the 87 counties. In 2000, the minority population was 7.5 percent. The median family income in 2000 was \$74,576.00.

Three hundred ninety seven child maltreatment allegations were assessed by Washington County Community Services in 2003. Of those, 308 were assessed traditionally and 139 of those were determined to be maltreatment; and eighty-nine assessments were Family Assessment Response.

Winona County

The county seat of Winona County is the city of Winona. It is located 115 miles south of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 2002, the population of Winona County was 49,623. The minority population in 2000 was 4.9 percent and the median family income in 2000 was \$49,845.00. In 2003, Winona County Human Services assessed 161 reports of alleged child maltreatment. Of those, 58 were assessed traditionally and maltreatment was substantiated in 30 cases; 103 assessments were Family Assessment Response.

