**Sweetwater County Department of Family Services Review**

Date of Review: September 29-October 2, 2014

The Wyoming Citizen Review Panel (WYCRP) conducted interviews of staff and community stakeholders to compile information about the state of child welfare in the Sweetwater County area, including Rock Springs and Green River.

Total Interviews:

DFS Staff – 12

Community Stakeholders – 21

**Sweetwater County Demographics:**

* One public transportation system (bus) within the Rock Springs area.
* There are two school districts within the area which houses 14 schools and one Head Start.
* 1 GAL in Sweetwater County to assist with the safety and well-being of children.
* As of 2013 the population of Sweetwater County was 45,237.

**Strengths:**

1. It is reported that children are being placed back into unstable environments which have the potential to result in re-entry. This may be related to the fact that Sweetwater County has a shortage of foster homes and treatment facilities. There may be instances when children are placed back with biological families before all of the “safety” issues are resolved.
2. Currently there are no therapeutic foster homes in the area. Sweetwater County has had difficulty recruiting an adequate number of foster homes, including therapeutic placements and homes for older youth.
3. There is a significant amount of children being placed in facilities or foster homes outside of their resident community. This may be related to the lack of foster homes and treatment facilities within Sweetwater County. Placing children outside of their resident communities makes it difficult for the children to maintain relationships with family, friends, schools, place of employment and/or other peer groups.
4. Stakeholders and staff appear to have children’s best interests as the primary focus of efforts around child welfare in Sweetwater County and maximize the available resources in the area to support families.
5. Many of the caseworkers report having a caseload average between 20-30 cases. This presents some safety issues for children that are under the direct supervision of these caseworkers. It is difficult for caseworkers to adequately address the needs of each individual family and perform the monthly face–to-face visits for every child in care. Another complicating factor related to high caseloads is the time commitment to perform face-to-face visits with children who reside across the state or in a neighboring state. This can create difficulty for the staff to complete their work in a 40-hour work week. Many caseworkers find themselves working in the evenings or on weekends.
6. This DFS office is currently undergoing the training for Signs of Safety. The staff feel that the training is valuable, but would like to be able to receive the full training in a timelier manner.
7. Referrals to the Child Development Center are occurring within a two weeks of placement for children under the age of six.

**Opportunities for growth**

1. According to staff in the local office, there appears to be a high court-ordered placement rate in Sweetwater County. Often times, there seems to be some discrepancies in the placement recommendations between the courts and the local DFS office. Some of these children are being placed outside of their residential area which makes it difficult for children to maintain their support network and have direct contact with their family and friends.
2. It is reported that the length of placement for some children is prolonging a permanency decision for these children, which is reported to be related to the court process. It is reported that the 12 month permanency policy is unobtainable at times due to the recommendations from the court system. Children are experiencing prolonged placements which impacts a child’s sense of stability. It is unclear how this is impacting reunification planning.
3. There is a lack of mental health facilities with a growing need for services. This makes it difficult for caseworkers to provide the necessary services for family stability.
4. There is a lack of specific treatment for juvenile sex offenders, so they are being left in the community or being sent to high intensity facilities.
5. Staff feel that training with the police department would be beneficial regarding role delineation, especially for new staff and officers. This would be an opportunity for both agencies to have a better understanding of each other’s rules around child welfare.

**Recommendations (local & state)**

1. Ongoing training for WYCAPS especially when updates are made. It was also recommended to create “cheat sheet” for general data entry steps into WYCAPS could be distributed upon hiring of a new staff. Staff could then update this information after CORE training and after WYCAPS updates.
2. Currently there are no inpatient treatment facility for minors dealing with substance abuse issues. This makes it difficult for children to have consistent access to their support networks while receiving treatment.
3. It reported that the therapists in Sweetwater County for juveniles and families are doing a great job. Although there are good services, the challenge is that they are full and aren’t able to see the clients at the recommended frequency.
4. It would be beneficial for more parenting classes to be offered in the community for both couples and single parents.
5. Trainings for staff are typically offered outside of the local area which makes it difficult to participate due to the time commitment, as it takes time away from casework. This is particularly difficult when caseloads are higher. Offering web based trainings so that the staff would not have to travel to the trainings and they can participate at their convenience.
6. There is an interest in understanding more about the Drug Endangered Children program. Several individuals have heard of the program but do not have an understanding of what the goals are for the program or how it could be implemented in the local area.
7. Work with local law enforcement to create a training for new officers and new caseworkers to better understand the roles of each other in the child welfare system.

**Summary:**

Sweetwater County is dedicated to improving lives of children and families. There are some challenges which make it difficult for children to stay in the local area. Sweetwater County has a smaller population base, which makes it difficult to have some of the necessary resources to serve families. When there is a lack of resources, it is essential that communities communicate effectively to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children. A community meeting be beneficial to ensure that all parties involved in the child welfare system in Sweetwater County have the same priorities for the families being served. Overall, services to children and families in Sweetwater County are coordinated well.