

Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council

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Advocate

Before 1995, foster parents' rights and responsibilities were undefined. Agencies and DCFS regional foster care programs independently and individually decided what foster parents should do. That was foster care before the declaration of the "Foster Parent Bill of Rights." Then, after years of targeted, strategic advocacy efforts by many foster parents, child welfare organizations, DCFS and the Governor's office, the bill became the Foster Parent Law.



The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council Law states the 14 rights and 17 responsibilities of all Illinois foster parents. It also establishes an official council to advise DCFS about foster care issues and to oversee the implementation of the Foster Parent Law.

The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council is the connection between those making the policies and the foster parents who experience the results of policy at home with the children in their care. The Council regularly works with the DCFS management team to provide program input on the front-end and to comment on how approved policies translate in the "real world."

In addition to policy consultation, the Council invests significant resources in the Foster Parent Law Implementation Plans, which all foster care programs must submit to the Council. The plans detail how the programs will protect foster parent rights and assist families with the responsibilities outlined in the Law. Council members develop all necessary procedures for reviewing and scoring the plans. The Council also sets procedures for evaluating how the implementation plans actually are incorporated into practice and it conducts on-site agency reviews to make sure implementation plans are being utilized.

The Council's diligent review and recommendations have contributed to:

- 2007 Cost of Living Adjustment in the monthly board rate
- New procedures for evaluating Foster Parent Law Implementation Plans
- More efficient payment methods for foster parent expenses
- Improved foster parent grievance procedures
- Enhancements to several foster parent training courses
- Wallet-sized foster parent license cards

Represent

The composition of the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council is set by law. The 22-member structure brings together parents and professionals who understand the work of foster care and want to see the Illinois child welfare system at its best.

Membership includes:

- Foster parent regional representatives, according to DCFS regions
 - 2 Northern region
 - 2 Southern region
 - 3 Central region
 - 6 Cook County (typically 2 from Cook South, Cook Central and Cook North)
- Current president of the Illinois Foster and Adoptive Parent Association
- 2 foster parents from the DCFS Child Welfare Advisory Committee (CWAC)
- 2 foster care professionals representing private agency foster care programs
- 4 "non-DCFS" persons with expertise in foster care

Potential foster parent members must be nominated by the regional administrator, and the DCFS Director appoints all members. Appointments are for three years and limited to two terms. Council members serve as volunteers without compensation. They do receive reimbursement for travel and expenses associated with participation.

Having the Council codified by Illinois statute has several benefits:

- Ensures foster parent involvement, regardless of any changes in DCFS leadership
- Preserves two-way communication between foster parents and DCFS
- Offers private agency foster parent and staff input about implementation issues unique to the non-DCFS foster care programs
- Spreads representation on the Council equitably among recognized foster parent groups and all geographic areas of Illinois
- Provides the Council the necessary authority to do its work

Advise

The Council's mandate is to advise and consult with the DCFS Director or a designee on all matters that involve or affect of how foster care services are delivered to abused, neglected, or dependent children and their families.

Council members:

- Provide input, identify, analyze, and recommend solutions to any issues in foster care
- Review and make recommendations on Department policies, guidelines, and procedures in the area of foster care
- Interpret to the general public the need for foster care and its benefits to the children and families involved
- Develop, as necessary, recommendations regarding the Department's improvement of child welfare service delivery
- Review and advise about pending legislation in the area of foster care and child welfare
- Develop recommendations concerning foster care training
- Participate in statewide planning and promoting foster parent involvement in local planning
- Maintain regular communications with the regional foster care advisory councils and Child Welfare Advisory Council

Evaluate

Every DCFS region and agency that provides foster care services has to submit an implementation plan to the Council that explains how it will uphold each of the 14 foster parent rights and what they will do to help foster parents achieve their 17 responsibilities. Members meet outside of full Council meetings during the month of December and sometimes into January to score the plans. All members are required to score their share of the plans. Members receive training each year.

Understanding that a plan is just a plan, council members conduct agency reviews to determine compliance with their Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan. One third of the programs come up for review each year. The Council Chair appoints two council members to review each agency or DCFS program. Each council member typically assists in at least



two reviews. Council members receive written guidelines to follow when scheduling and conducting the reviews.

Due to the diligent oversight and close scrutiny of the Council, agencies and DCFS regions are submitting higher quality plans. More importantly, they are using their implementation plans as practice guides. The council ensures that foster parents can use the Foster Parent Law and the implementation plans to assert their rights and achieve their responsibilities. The increased level of teamwork and communication is making the system better for children and families.

Participate

The Council meets at least every other month, with additional meetings as needed. The Council began meeting in only Springfield and Chicago, but now visits communities around the state. Rotating the meeting locations gives the Council an opportunity to hear local concerns from more caregivers. The council votes on the meeting schedule and locations before the beginning of each fiscal year.

Meetings typically start at 9 a.m. and adjourn at 3 p.m., including a working lunch. Council members also participate in at least one committee. Committee meetings occur outside of regular council meetings, usually by conference call for convenience.

Communicate

The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council meetings are open to the public. The council posts announcements of all meetings on the DCFS Web site, www.state.il.us/dcf. The Council's page is located under the foster care links.

The membership list and minutes of previous meetings are available there. The newsletter, *Illinois Families Now and Forever*, also recaps meetings and announces upcoming meetings.

Foster parent members who represent one of the six regions, regularly attend regional advisory council meetings. They are able to pursue issues locally and can elevate issues to the Statewide Council. Statewide members also bring news from the statewide meetings back to the local councils.

To reach a member of the Council or to gain more information about the Council, contact the DCFS Office of Foster Parent Support Services. This office, a part of the Division of Clinical Services and Professional Development, provides direct support to assist the Council in performing its work.

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