U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

Final Report
North Carolina Child and Family Services Review
June 25

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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Introduction

This document presents the findings of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for the State of North Carolina. The CFSR is the Federal government's program for assessing the performance of State child welfare agencies with regard to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. It is authorized by the Social Security Amendments of 1994 requiring the Department of Health and Human Services to promulgate regulations for reviews of State child and family services programs under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. The CFSR is implemented by the Children's Bureau (CB) of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The North Carolina CFSR was conducted the week of March 26, 2007. The period under review was from 10/1/05 to 3/26/07. The findings were derived from the following documents and data collection procedures:

- The Statewide Assessment, prepared by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services (DSS).
- The State Data Profile, prepared by CB, of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which provides State child welfare data for the years 2003, 2004, and 2005.
- Reviews of 65 cases at three sites throughout the State: 31 cases in Mecklenburg County, 17 cases in Catawba County, and 17 cases in Nash County.
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three sites and at the State-level) with stakeholders including, but not limited to children, parents, foster parents, all levels of child welfare agency personnel, collaborating agency personnel, service providers, court personnel, and attorneys.

Information from each source is presented for all of the items reviewed.

All 65 cases were open child welfare agency cases at some time during the period under review. The key characteristics of the 65 cases reviewed are presented in the table on the following page.

The first section of the report (Section A: Outcomes) presents the CFSR findings relevant to the State's performance in achieving specified outcomes for children in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being. For each outcome, there is a table presenting the data for the case review findings and national indicators (when relevant). The table is followed by a discussion of the State's status with regard to substantial conformity with the outcome at the time of the State's first CFSR review, the State's status as it relates to the current review, and a presentation and discussion of each item (indicator) assessed under the outcome. Differences in findings across the sites included in the onsite review are described when noteworthy. Variations in outcome and item ratings as a function of type of case (i.e., foster care or in-home services) also are identified when appropriate. The second section of the report (Section B: Systemic Factors) provides an assessment and discussion of the systemic factors relevant to the child welfare agency's ability to achieve positive outcomes for children.

TABLE OF CASE CHARACTERISTICS

Case Characteristics	Foster Care Cases	In-Home Cases
	40	25
When case was opened/child entered foster care		
Open prior to the period under review	31 (77.5%)	13 (52%)
Open during the period under review	9 (22.5%)	12 (48%)
Child entered foster care during the period under review	12 (30%)	
Child's age at start of period under review		NA
Younger than age 10	17 (42.5%)	
At least 10 but younger than 13	3 (7.5%)	
At least 13 but younger than 16	10 (25%)	
16 and older	10 (25%)	
Race/Ethnicity		
African American (Non-Hispanic)	27 (61%)	
White (Non-Hispanic)	8 (21%)	
Hispanic (of all races)	0 (0%)	
Two or more races	3 (8%)	
Primary Reason for opening case		
Neglect (not including medical neglect)	19 (47.5%)	13 (52%)
Physical abuse	3 (7.5%)	1 (4%)
Sexual abuse	1 (2.5%)	1 (4%)
Medical neglect	1 (2.5%)	
Child's Behavior/Juvenile Justice	3 (7.5%)	1 (4%)
Substance abuse by parent	3 (7.5%)	2 (8%)
Domestic violence in child's home	1 (2.5%)	6 (24%)
Emotional maltreatment		1 (4%)
Abandonment	1 (2.5%)	
Mental physical health of child	2 (5%)	
No one available to care for child (due to death, illness, or incarceration)	2 (5%)	
Mental/physical health of parent	1 (2.5%)	
Other ("Dependency")	3 (7.5%)	

*Information on these characteristics for in-home services cases is not provided because all children in the family are considered in these cases.

SECTION A: OUTCOMES

In the Outcomes Section of the CSFR Final Report, an overall rating of Strength or Area Needing Improvement is assigned to each of the 23 indicators (items) reviewed. An item is assigned an overall rating of Strength if 90 percent of the applicable cases reviewed were rated as a Strength. In addition to the item ratings, States are evaluated with regard to performance on seven outcomes, each of which incorporates one or more of the individual items. The evaluation options for these outcomes are Substantially Achieved, Partially Achieved, and Not Achieved. In order for a State to be in substantial conformity with a particular outcome, 95 percent of the cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome. Two outcomes—Safety Outcome 1 and Permanency Outcome 1—also are evaluated based on State performance with regard to seven national data indicators. In order for a State to be in substantial conformity with these outcomes, the national standards for each data indicator must be met, as well as the case review requirements. A State that is not in substantial conformity with a particular outcome must develop and implement a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address the areas of concern identified for that outcome.

CB, ACF, has set a very high standard of performance for the CFSR. The standards are based on the belief that because child welfare agencies work with our nation's most vulnerable children and families, only the highest standards of performance should be considered acceptable. The standards are set high to ensure ongoing attention to achieving positive outcomes for children and families with regard to safety, permanency, and well-being. The goal of the CFSR is to promote continuous improvement in performance on these outcomes.

It should be noted, however, that States are not required to attain the 95 percent standard established for the CFSR onsite review at the end of their PIP implementation. ACF recognizes that the kinds of systemic and practice changes necessary to bring about improvement in particular outcome areas often are time-consuming to implement. Also, improvements are likely to be incremental rather than dramatic. Instead, States work with ACF to establish a specified amount of improvement or implement specified activities for their Program Improvement Plan. That is, for each outcome or item that is an area needing improvement, each State (working in conjunction with the Children's Bureau) specifies how much improvement the State will demonstrate and/or the activities that it will implement to address the areas needing improvement, and determines the procedures for demonstrating the achievement of these goals. Both the improvements specified and the procedures for demonstrating improvement vary across States. Therefore, a State can meet the requirements of its Program Improvement Plan and still not perform at the 95 or 90 percent level requirements of the CFSR.

The second round of the CFSR is intended to assess a State's current level of performance by once more applying high standards and consistent comprehensive case review methodology. The results of this effort are intended to serve as the basis for continued Program Improvement Plans addressing areas in which a State still needs to improve, even though prior Program Improvement Plan requirements may have been achieved. The goal is to ensure that program improvement is an ongoing process and does not end with the closing of a PIP.

In the following sections, for each outcome assessed, there is a discussion of how the State performed on that outcome in the first round. If the outcome was not substantially achieved during the first round of the CFSR, there is a discussion of the key concerns identified at that time and the strategies implemented in the Program Improvement Plan to address those concerns. This discussion also focuses on whether the key concerns that emerged in the first CFSR continued to be present in the second review, or whether those concerns were resolved, but other concerns emerged.

Because many changes have been made in the onsite CFSR process based on lessons learned during the first round and in response to feedback from the child welfare field, a State's performance in the second round of the CFSR is not directly comparable to their performance in the first round, particularly with regard to comparisons of data indicators or percentages regarding Strength and Area Needing Improvement ratings. Key changes in the CFSR process that make it difficult to compare performance across reviews are the following:

- An increase in the sample size from 50 to 65 cases.
- Stratification of the sample to ensure a minimum number of cases in key program areas, resulting in variations in the number of cases relevant for specific outcomes and items.
- Changes in criteria for specific items to increase consistency and to ensure an assessment of critical areas, such as child welfare agency efforts to involve non-custodial parents.

I. SAFETY

Safety Outcome 1

Outcome S1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total Number**	**Percentage**
Substantially Achieved	6	15	3	24	**66.7**
Partially Achieved	3	4	2	9	**25.0**
Not Achieved or Addressed	2	1	0	3	**8.3**
Total Applicable Cases	**11**	**20**	**5**	**36**	
Not Applicable Cases	6	11	12	29	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	
Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:					
		National Standard (%)	**State's Percentage**	**Meets Standard**	
Absence of maltreatment recurrence		94.6	92.1	NO	
Absence of maltreatment of children in foster		99.68	99.01	NO	

care by foster parents or facility staff			

STATUS OF SAFETY OUTCOME 1

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 66.7 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for a rating of substantial conformity. Variations in performance on this outcome are not meaningful because of the small number of applicable cases, particularly in Nash County.

North Carolina also did not meet the national standards for the two data indicators relevant for Safety Outcome 1. These indicators pertain to the absence of maltreatment recurrence and the absence of maltreatment of children in foster care by foster parents or facility staff.

North Carolina was not in substantial conformity with this outcome for its 2001 CFSR and was required to address this outcome in its Program Improvement Plan. During the first review, item 1, which pertains to timeliness of initiation investigations, was rated as a Strength, but item 2, pertaining to repeat maltreatment, was rated as an Area Needing Improvement.

Key Concerns from the 2001 CFSR

Key concerns during the 2001 CFSR relevant to this item were the following:

- Maltreatment reports received on open cases were not formally investigated as new reports but instead forwarded to the ongoing caseworker as "additional information."
- Maltreatment reports often were screened out without clear rationales for the decision.

To address these concerns, North Carolina implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- The State clarified through policy what constitutes a new maltreatment report and when the report should be accepted for investigation or assessment. The policy indicates that maltreatment reports received on open cases are to be treated the same as new reports.
- The State developed a structured decision-making (SDM) instrument to improve safety assessments and increase the consistency of the screening process for reports of abuse and neglect.
- The State revised the DSS intake form to focus on risk indicators and ensure the collection of critical safety- and risk-related information on the family.

North Carolina was determined to have achieved its PIP goals.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

In contrast to the 2001 CFSR, the 2007 CFSR found both item 1 and item 2 to be Areas Needing Improvement. However, the findings of the 2007 CFSR suggest that the concerns identified in the 2001 CFSR were mostly resolved. For example, the 2007 review found that when maltreatment allegations were received on open cases, those allegations were routinely treated as new investigations and assigned to an investigative caseworker. In addition, the 2007 review did not identify concerns regarding the screening process for allegations of abuse or neglect. This may be attributed to North Carolina's implementation of a Multiple Response System after the 2001 CFSR, which enhances the ability of the agency to respond to maltreatment reports with an assessment rather than an investigation.

Despite the resolution of these concerns, the State continues to experience challenges with regard to preventing maltreatment recurrences within a 6-month period, as evidenced by their national data for the measure of absence of maltreatment recurrence and their performance on the case review item relevant to this item. Although no consistent problems could be identified in the cases reviewed, stakeholders interviewed during the onsite review noted that when there is repeat maltreatment, it is most likely to be due to domestic violence or parent's substance abuse. There was general agreement among stakeholders that there are challenges in the State with regard to accessing services to address these needs.

Performance on item 1 was more likely to be an issue in Mecklenburg and Catawba Counties than in Nash County. A key issue that emerged with regard to item 1 (timeliness of initiating investigations) was that there appeared to be some confusion in initiating the investigation when an allegation was received on a case that was already open for services or that involved a family with a prior history in another county. Of the seven cases rated as an Area Needing Improvement for item 1, four had a response timeframe of 72 hours, one had a response time frame of 24 hours, and two were in Mecklenburg County and had "immediate" response timeframes.

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 1 are presented below.

Item 1: Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

____ Strength _X_ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: The assessment of item 1 was applicable for 36 (55 percent) of the 65 cases. Cases were not applicable when there were no reports of child maltreatment during the period under review. In assessing item 1, reviewers were to determine whether the response to a maltreatment report occurring during the period under review had been initiated in accordance with the State child welfare agency policy requirements.

North Carolina policy states that initiation of an investigative assessment or a family assessment requires face-to-face contact with the alleged victim children and that all children living in the home shall be considered as alleged victim children when there is any

allegation of abuse, neglect, or dependency. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, effective January 2006, North Carolina's Multiple Response System (MRS) was in place in all 100 counties. One of seven MRS strategies is the choice of two approaches to a CPS report – family assessment and a more traditional forensic track investigative assessment for reports of abuse and serious neglect. Response times in North Carolina are mandated by legislation. The response must be initiated within 24 hours when there is an abuse report and 72 hours when there is a neglect report. An immediate response is required to high risk allegations.

The results of the assessment of this item are presented in the table below.

Item 1	**Catawba**	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total N**	**Percent**
Strength	8	16	5	29	**81**
Area Needing Improvement	3	4	0	7	**19**
Total Applicable Cases	**11**	**20**	**5**	**36**	
Not applicable	6	11	12	29	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Variations in performance on this measure are difficult to interpret, primarily because of the small number of applicable cases in Nash County.

Item 1 was rated as a Strength when the investigation was initiated and face-to-face contact was established with the child within the time frames required by State policy or law. It was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when face-to-face contact was not established within the required time frames. In four of the seven cases rated as an Area Needing Improvement, there was already an open case on the family at the time that the allegation was received. Also, in four of the seven cases, the required response time-frame was 72 hours; in two cases, it was 24 hours; and in one case in Mecklenburg County, the response category was "immediate."

A key finding of the case review was that, for many of the cases reviewed, there were multiple maltreatment reports on families during the life of the case, most of which were not substantiated or indicated. In 16 of these cases, there were 10 or more total maltreatment allegations on the family and in 3 of these cases, there were 20 or more maltreatment allegations on the family during the life of the case.

In addition, there were two cases in which reviewers determined that the case should have been investigated, rather than referred for family assessment. One of these cases involved an allegation of sexual abuse, which, according to State policy, must be investigated.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR generally agreed that the agency usually responds to maltreatment allegations in accordance with policy requirements. They noted that the State provides clear guidelines with regard to both assessment

and investigations under the State's new MRS. Stakeholders in Mecklenburg County said that they have a "stricter" response system than the State has in that they require a 0-2 hour response time for some reports, and 24-hour response timeframe for others. Nash County stakeholders said that caseworkers respond after-hours and on weekends and "keep looking until they find the families." They noted that flextime and comp time are offered to compensate for the after-hours and weekend work.

Most stakeholders reported that the agency works closely with law enforcement and with the schools in responding to maltreatment reports. Catawba County stakeholders noted that there is a protocol established between DSS supervisors and the schools to address any instance in which a caseworker did not respond in a timely manner to a maltreatment allegation. Mecklenburg County stakeholders indicated that the county DSS has developed protocols and various procedures with the school system to address maltreatment allegations as well as emergencies, as when a child says he or she is afraid to go home.

Rating Determination

Item 1 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 81 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had initiated an investigation of a maltreatment report in accordance with the required time frames. This percentage is less than the 90 percent required for an overall item rating of Strength. For the State's first CFSR, conducted in 2001, this item was rated as a Strength. Catawba County experienced greater challenges regarding responding to maltreatment allegations in a timely manner than did the other sites included in the CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that of 1,235 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005, 90 percent were rated as a Strength regarding this measure, and of 702 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006, 89 percent were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also notes that in examining the administrative data, it was found that cases reported as abuse are on average responded to within 24 hours as policy dictates. On average, cases reported as neglect have all been responded to in less than the 72 hour time period mandated by policy since 2003.

Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

____ Strength _X_ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

The assessment of item 2 was applicable for 24 (37 percent) of the 65 cases. Cases were not applicable for this item if there was no substantiated or indicated maltreatment report during the period under review. For all applicable cases, reviewers were to determine whether there had been a substantiated or indicated maltreatment report on the family during the period under review, and if so, whether another substantiated or indicated report involving similar circumstances had occurred within a 6-month period before or after that identified report.

Information regarding the ratings is provided below.

Item 2	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	5	11	1	17	**71**
Area Needing Improvement	3	2	2	7	**29**
Total Applicable Cases	**8**	**13**	**3**	**24**	
Not applicable	9	18	14	41	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Variations in performance across the three sites are not meaningful because of the small number of applicable cases, particularly in Nash County cases.

Item 2 was rated as a Strength when there was no indication of two or more substantiated or indicated maltreatment reports on the family within a 6-month period, or when there were two or more substantiated reports, but they did not involve the same perpetrator or circumstances. Item 2 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in seven cases when there were two substantiated maltreatment reports within a 6-month period that involved the same general circumstances. In four of these seven cases, the allegations involved neglect and parental substance abuse.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Some stakeholders suggested that reports involving domestic violence and/or substance abuse are the ones that are most likely to recur. However, these stakeholders and others indicated that the agency has implemented new programs to address substance abuse and domestic violence issues. Stakeholders in Nash County talked about the extra measures the agency makes towards preventing removal of children from the home. They noted that petitions for removal from the home are for cases that are deemed the most challenging and that there may be cases that need court intervention early on, which might prevent repeat maltreatment.

Rating Determination

Item 2 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 71 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that there was no recurrence of maltreatment. This percentage is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength. In the State's first CFSR, this item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement and the State was required to address it in a Program Improvement Plan. Also, the State did not meet the national standard for the data indicator pertaining to the absence of recurrence of maltreatment established for the 2001 CFSR and the 2007 CFSR. However, there has been consistent improvement in performance on this measure since 2001.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, unmet domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health needs have been identified by stakeholders as the primary contributors to repeat maltreatment in the State. The Statewide Assessment also notes that DSS is attempting to identify these issues early on in the case by requiring universal screenings for domestic violence and substance abuse at intake. It was noted that since the last CFSR, a comprehensive domestic violence policy was developed through a multidisciplinary work group and that comprehensive domestic violence training has been offered regionally to all 100 counties. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the North Carolina Director's of Social Services Association is leading efforts to develop a domestic violence regional model to strengthen service delivery at the community level. There remain some counties who do not have domestic violence shelters or batterer treatment programs, and the regional model will build capacity.

Safety Outcome 2

Safety Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total**	**Percentage**
Substantially Achieved:	11	23	14	48	73.8
Partially Achieved:	2	3	0	5	7.7
Not Achieved or Addressed:	4	5	3	12	18.5
Total Applicable	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	
Not Applicable:	0	0	0	0	

STATUS OF SAFETY OUTCOME 2

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 73.8 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for a rating of substantial conformity. Performance on this item varied across counties. The outcome was substantially achieved in 82 percent of Nash County cases and 74 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, compared to 65 percent of Catawba County cases.

Key Concerns of the 2001 CFSR

The State was not in substantial conformity with this outcome for the 2001 CFSR. Both items included in the outcome were rated as Areas Needing Improvement at that time and were addressed in the State's Program Improvement Plan.

Areas of concern identified during the 2001 CFSR included the following

- Insufficient attention was given to the risk associated with parents' substance abuse and domestic violence in the home.
- There were delays in the provision of key services, including family preservation services, due primarily to a scarcity of services.

- The standards of practice for in-home services cases often were inadequate, particularly with regard to risk assessment and the frequency of caseworker contacts.
- There was a lack of in-depth assessments in some cases.

North Carolina implemented the following PIP strategies to address these concerns:

- The State developed an assessment structure to address critical family issues associated with risk, such as domestic violence and substance abuse.
- The State enhanced the capacity of Family Resource Centers to provide in-home services designed to maintain children safely in their own homes.
- The State revised their Quality Assurance reviews to mirror the Federal CFSR in order to ensure appropriate monitoring and evaluation of PIP strategies.

North Carolina was determined to have achieved its PIP goals by the end of the implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

Similar to the 2001 CFSR, in the 2007 CFSR the two items incorporated in Safety Outcome 2 were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. The findings of the 2007 CFSR case reviews suggest that the State continues to experience challenges in addressing the safety and risk issues for children in the in-home services cases. For example, item 4, which addresses risk of harm issues, was rated as a Strength in 82 percent of the foster care cases compared to 64 percent of the in-home services cases. Also, many of the cases rated as an Area Needing Improvement for items 3 and 4 received that rating because while services were provided to the family, they did not address the family's safety issues adequately. The missing services often pertained to parents' substance abuse and mental health problems. The data indicate that Catawba County experienced greater challenges than the two other counties with regard to performance on this outcome.

Despite the concerns, there were many cases, particularly in Nash County, in which DSS was effective in addressing the safety and risk issues affecting the child. Reviewers found that when children could not be safely maintained in the home, DSS frequently sought relatives or fictive kin to provide care for the child on an informal basis while the family received services. In addition, Family Resource Centers were identified as an important source of services for the in-home cases.

Most stakeholders expressed the opinion that the agency is effective in conducting safety and risk assessment. However, several of these stakeholders reported that substance abuse treatment and domestic violence services are not sufficient to address the needs of the children and families coming into contact with the child welfare system. They also noted that children's mental health needs are not being effectively managed in the community, which results in children entering foster care because of behavioral and mental health problems. A key concern voiced by stakeholders was that services were easier to access for children in foster care than children

remaining in their own homes. This was due both to availability of services and adequate funding sources to pay for the services when children are not in State custody.

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 2 are presented below.

Item 3. Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
An assessment of item 3 was applicable in 43 (66 percent) of the 65 cases. Cases were excluded from this assessment if the children entered foster care prior to the period under review and there were no other children in the home or if there was no substantiated or indicated maltreatment report or identified risk of harm to the children in the home during the period under review. For this item, reviewers assessed whether, in responding to a substantiated maltreatment report or risk of harm, the agency made diligent efforts to provide services to families to prevent placement of children in foster care while at the same time ensuring their safety. The results of this assessment are shown in the table below.

Item 3	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	8	16	7	31	**72**
Area Needing Improvement	4	5	3	12	**28**
Total Applicable Cases	**12**	**21**	**10**	**43**	
Not applicable	5	10	7	22	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

There was little variation in performance on this item across sites. Item 3 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- Services were provided to the parents and child to prevent removal (20 cases).
- The child was placed with relatives and services were provided to the relatives, parents, and children (6 cases).
- The children were appropriately removed from the home because the removal was necessary to ensure the child's safety (4 cases).
- Services were provided after the reunification of the child with a relative (1 case).

Case review information indicates that a range of services was offered or provided to families. These included (but were not limited to) the following: mental health services, family action meetings, family preservation services, parenting skills services, transportation, employment services, food stamps, substance abuse assessment and treatment, assistance with household bills, parenting classes, domestic violence evaluation and services, visiting nurse program, housing services, and child care services.

Item 3 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- No services were provided and the children remained at risk in the home (3 cases).
- Some services were provided but they did not adequately address the safety issues in the family (6 cases).
- No services were provided after reunification to ensure the child's ongoing safety and prevent re-entry (3 cases).

Stakeholder Interview Information

The majority of stakeholders commenting on this item during the CFSR onsite review expressed the opinion that the agency generally provides services to families to prevent removal of children from the home and to keep the family together. A few stakeholders also noted that the agency's decisions about when a child should be removed and when a child should be maintained at home usually are appropriate. A few stakeholders, however, noted that children coming into foster care often have families with substance abuse or domestic violence problems and available services are not sufficient to adequately address these problems. In addition, they noted that many children enter foster care because of behavioral and mental health needs that are not being managed in the community.

Catawba County stakeholders indicated that Family Net (a program operated by the child welfare agency in the county) has started a family preservation program to provide in-home services for mental health and substance abuse concerns. Stakeholders in this county also noted that there is ongoing assessment of safety and risk as well as family needs and strengths every 3 months as well as ongoing monitoring through home visits. Nash and Mecklenburg County stakeholders pointed to the Child and Family Team meetings as key to ensuring that children can be safety maintained in their homes.

Rating Determination

Item 3 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 72.1 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DSS had made concerted efforts to maintain children safely in their own homes. This percentage is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that of 1,124 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005, 86 percent were rated as a Strength for this item, while 82 percent of 694 cases reviewed from July 2005 through June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also notes that North Carolina offers many community-based services to ensure that families are able to protect children in their home and prevent entry into foster care. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, Intensive Family Preservation Services and Reunification services have been expanded since the first CFSR in 2001 and now are available in all 100 counties in the State.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, a few years ago, North Carolina applied for and received grant funding from the Children's Bureau to implement a System of Care (SOC) Demonstration Project. The grant was implemented in three pilot MRS counties—

Alamance, Bladen, and Mecklenburg. The Statewide Assessment notes that, although it is too early in the grant to draw conclusions regarding the relationship between the SOC activities and improvements on the Federal Outcome Measures, all three counties have lower rates of repeat maltreatment compared to the State as a whole. The Statewide Assessment attributes the performance of these counties to the SOC principles and expresses the opinion that the program is keeping children safe in their own homes.

Item 4. Risk of harm to child

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
An assessment of item 4 was applicable for all 65 cases. The results of this assessment are shown in the table below.

Item 4	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	11	24	14	49	**75**
Area Needing Improvement	6	7	3	16	**25**
Total Applicable Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	
Not applicable	0	0	0	0	

As shown in the table, performance on this item differed across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 82 percent of Nash County cases and 77 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, compared to 65 percent of Catawba County cases. There also was variation in performance on this item based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 82 percent of the foster care cases compared to 64 percent of the in-home services cases.

Item 4 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the risk of harm to children was appropriately addressed by the agency through (1) conducting initial and ongoing assessments of risk and safety either in the children's home or in children's foster homes and, (2) addressing all safety-related concerns identified through the assessment. Item 4 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement primarily when reviewers determined the following:

- There was risk of harm to the children when they were in their homes and the services necessary to reduce that risk were not provided or the safety plan that was established was not sufficient to address the risk (9 cases).
- There was no documentation of ongoing risk assessment in the foster home or non-foster care placement setting (2 cases).
- The case was closed prematurely before safety issues were fully addressed and without a comprehensive assessment (4 cases).
- There was risk of harm to the child due to continual running away (1 case).

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite review expressed the opinion that the agency is effective in assessing risk of harm to children when they are in their own homes and when they are in out-of-home placements. Several stakeholders reported that the agency requires a lot of documentation to verify that the assessments are being conducted. Several stakeholders across sites reported that the Structured Decision Making tool has been useful in ensuring detailed risk and safety assessments and developing appropriate safety plans for families. Stakeholders also suggested that the number of contacts with foster children made by both the licensing worker (once every 3 months) and the caseworkers (once a month) serve as a check on safety issues in out-of-home placements. One stakeholder in Nash County indicated that corporal punishment in foster homes "is not tolerated."

Rating Determination

Item 4 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 75 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DSS had appropriately addressed the risk of harm to the children. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for an overall rating of Strength. Addressing risk of harm to children appears to be a greater challenge in Catawba County than in the other two sites, and, as might be expected, a greater challenge in the in-home services cases than in the foster care cases. In the State's first CFSR, conducted in 2001, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the structured decision making tools implemented after the State's 2001 CFSR require continual evaluation of safety and risk for both in-home and foster care cases. In addition, as indicated in the Statewide Assessment, since the 2001 CFSR, North Carolina has clarified through policy that any allegations received during the provision of in-home services that meet the required definitions of abuse or neglect require a thorough assessment and completion of all SDM tools. This also holds true for allegations received during the provision of foster care services. The Statewide Assessment note that State biennial CFSR results indicate that 94 percent of 1,124 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item and 90 percent of the 694 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength.

II. PERMANENCY

Permanency Outcome 1

Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total**	**Percent**
Substantially Achieved	4	11	8	23	57.5
Partially Achieved	4	8	2	14	35.0
Not Achieved or Addressed	2	1	0	3	7.5
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:			
	National Standard (Scaled Score)	**State's Composite Score**	**Meets Standard (Yes/No)**
Composite 1: Timeliness and permanency of reunification	122.6 +	139.4	YES
Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions	106.4 +	123.3	YES
Composite 3: Permanency for children in foster care for extended time periods	121.7 +	117.1	NO
Composite 4: Placement stability	101.5 +	52.4	NO

STATUS OF PERMANENCY OUTCOME 1

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following findings:

- The outcome was substantially achieved in 57.5 percent of the cases, which is less than the 95 percent required for an overall rating of substantial conformity.
- The State Data Profile indicates that for Federal fiscal year 2005, the State did not meet the national standards for Composite 3: Permanency for children in foster care for extended time periods, and Composite 4: Placement stability.

Although the State's score for Composite 4 does not meet the national standard, recent data suggest that the composite score for 2005 may reflect a data quality issue rather than actual performance. Recently, the State submitted fiscal year 2006 data to the Federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) that resulted in a Composite 4 score of 101.8 for fiscal year 2006. The considerable change in performance was attributed to the State correcting errors in the way placement changes were recorded and reported to AFCARS in prior years. However, because the State did not resubmit data for FY 2005 (the year used for the CFSR), there is no corrected score for that year. The 2006 corrections were reviewed and verified by the Children's Bureau data team.

The State did meet the national standard for Permanency Composite 1: Timeliness and permanency of reunifications, and Permanency Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions. Performance on the individual measures included in all composites is presented in the discussion of the items related to each measure.

North Carolina's performance on this outcome varied considerably across sites. The outcome was found to be substantially achieved in 80 percent of Nash County cases compared to 55 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 40 percent of Catawba County cases.

Key Concerns from the 2001 CFSR

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with this outcome during the first CFSR conducted in Federal fiscal year 2001. In the 2001 CFSR, item 6 (pertaining to placement stability), item 7 (pertaining to establishing permanency goals for children in a timely manner), and item 8 (independent living services) were each rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Since North Carolina's 2001 CFSR, item 8 changed from an assessment of independent living services to an assessment of timeliness of reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives. In the 2007 CFSR, the quality and provision of independent living services is captured in items 10 and 17, and under the Systemic Factor of Service Array.

Key concerns identified during the 2001 CFSR with regard to Permanency Outcome 1 were the following:

- Some cases with permanency goals of "custody with court-approved caretaker" or "guardianship" did not reflect efforts on the part of caseworkers to locate guardians or caretakers to assume custody of the child.
- There was evidence in the case reviews and stakeholder interviews that adoption often was ruled out as a plan for children older than 8 years of age, based on the belief that children 8 and older are not likely to be adopted.
- In many of the foster care cases involving adolescents, independent living services were not being offered or provided.
- Children with behavior problems were found to experience frequent moves due to the inability of caretakers to address their problems.

North Carolina implemented the following strategies in its PIP to address these concerns:

- Developed the LINKS program to improve independent living services to youth.
- Implemented the System of Care approach to support and provide wrap-around services to children and families, including foster families, to support and stabilize foster placements.
- Adopted the family-centered practice goals of the System of Care approach to improve permanency planning.
- Expedited reunifications by training foster parents in Shared Parenting, which involves working closely with biological parents.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

Similar to the 2001 CFSR, in the State's 2007 CFSR, items 6 and 7 also were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. However, in the 2007 review, item 9 (timeliness of adoption) also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement. In the 2007 review, item 8 (timeliness of reunification, guardianship, and permanent placement with relatives) was rated as an Area Needing Improvement, but this item differs from item 8 (independent living services) in the 2001 CFSR. Item 10 was rated as a Strength in the 2007 CFSR, although the assessment included two cases.

Also, similar to the 2001 CFSR, the 2007 CFSR continued to find that children were changing placements because of behavior problems that caretakers were unable to address and that insufficient efforts were made to address the problems before the disruption of the placement. The 2007 CFSR also continued to find cases in which goals of guardianship were in place, but little efforts were being made to achieve that goal. In most of these cases, the goal of guardianship was still in place when the child aged out of foster care. However, in contrast to the 2001 CFSR, case reviewers found that in most of the foster-care cases involving youth, the youth

were receiving independent living services. In addition, stakeholders praised the quality of the LINKS independent living program, although there was general agreement among stakeholders that there remained a scarcity of independent living services in the State.

Additional key findings of the 2007 CFSR case reviews were the following:

- Although North Carolina has one of the lowest percentages of foster care re-entry in the nation with regard to the national data, the item was rated as a Strength in 83 percent of the cases. The Statewide Assessment notes, however, that the State's foster care entry rate of 2.3 percent may reflect a data-quality issue rather than an actual re-entry rate because the State does not assign a unique statewide identifier for children. Instead, individual counties assign identifiers for children in their county. Therefore, if a child re-entered foster care in a new county within 12 months of reunification, the second county would assign a new identification number to that child and the data would show that child as a first-time entry into foster care (item 5).
- With regard to placement stability, reviewers determined that placement changes occurred primarily as a result of children's behavior problems, and that the agency did not make concerted efforts to address the problems in the placement before they resulted in a disruption (Item 6).
- Although in most cases, permanency goals were established in a timely manner and were appropriate, there were several cases in which reviewers determined that either timeliness or appropriateness was a concern (item 7).

Stakeholders expressed the following opinions relevant to this outcome.

- Re-entry into foster care is not a frequent occurrence in the State.
- Placement stability is not a problem for most children and when placements change, it usually is in the best interest of the child. However, placement stability is more of a problem for older children and children with behavior problems.
- DSS uses concurrent planning on a frequent basis to ensure permanency for children, with concurrent goals usually being guardianship and adoption or reunification and guardianship.
- Although adoption assistance payments have expedited the adoption process, and the courts usually work in conjunction with the agency to expedite the adoption process, the lengthy appeals process for termination of parental rights extends the time period children are in foster care prior to adoption and also results in the disruption of some pre-adoptive placements.

The data indicate that achieving Permanency Outcome 1 was a greater challenge in Catawba County than it was in the other two sites. Nash County, in particular, was found to be generally effective with regard to achieving this outcome.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Permanency Outcome 1 are presented below.

Item 5. Foster care re-entries

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
An assessment of item 5 was applicable for 12 (30 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable for assessment if the child did not enter foster care during the period under review. In assessing this item, reviewers determined whether the entry into foster care during the period under review occurred within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 5	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	2	7	1	10	**83**
Area Needing Improvement	1	1	0	2	**17**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**3**	**8**	**1**	**12**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	7	12	9	28	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

State performance in 2005 on the individual measure of foster care reentry (Measure C1.4) included in Composite 1: Timeliness and permanency of reunification was as follows: 2.3 percent of the children exiting foster care in 2004 reentered foster care in less than 12 months. For the data set used to establish the national standards for the data composites, the median performance on this measure was 15.0 percent, and the 25th percentile was 9.9 percent. For this measure, lower percentages are associated with higher levels of performance. These data indicate that North Carolina has one of the lowest foster care re-entry percentages in the nation.

The ratings for item 5, however, do not support the national indicator data findings. Item 5 was rated as a Strength in 10 cases in which the child's entry into foster care during the period under review did not take place within 12 months of discharge from a prior episode. Item 5 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in two cases in which the entry into foster care during the period under review occurred within 12 months of the child's discharge from a prior foster care episode. In one case, the children re-entered foster care 7 months after being returned home for a trial home visit and only a few days after case closure. Although the agency provided services during the trial home visit period and prior to case closure, they did not appear to be sufficient to address the mother's substance abuse problems. In the other case, the child re-entered foster care in less than 5 months from the time of discharge from a prior episode. In this case, the child had been discharged to a permanent placement with the maternal grandmother in another State because the mother was not complying with the case plan. However, the mother regained custody of the children in that State and brought them back to North Carolina where they re-entered care.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item expressed the opinion that re-entry into foster care is not a frequent occurrence. They identified the following factors as contributing to a low rate of foster care re-entry:

- Use of the risk re-assessment tool at the time of reunification.
- The fact that courts order trial home visits before custody is officially returned so that DSS can continue to provide services and monitor the family.
- The practice of the Drug Court of monitoring cases for 30 to 90 days after reunification (Mecklenburg County only).

Rating Determination

Item 5 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. The item was rated as a Strength in only 83 percent of the cases, which is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. In the State's 2001 CFSR, this item was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 96 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, while 71 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment provided the following explanation for this considerable difference in percentages: "It is our belief that we are placing children with more significant needs who represent a real challenge to foster care providers and have a tendency to re-enter the system, as they are difficult to serve."

The Statewide Assessment also notes that the State's foster care entry rate of 2.3 percent may reflect a data quality issue rather than an actual re-entry rate because North Carolina does not assign a unique statewide identifier for children. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, in North Carolina, individual counties assign identifiers for children in that county. Therefore, if a child re-entered foster care in a new county within 12 months of reunification, the second county would assign a new identification number to that child and the data would show that child as a first-time entry into foster care. In addition, in the State Data Profile provided by the Federal Children's Bureau and presented in the Statewide Assessment, the Children's Bureau's data team expressed concern about the very high percentage of new entries into foster care reported by North Carolina and encouraged the State to review that data for possible data quality problems.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina recognizes the lack of unique statewide identifiers as a serious data quality issue and has a work group underway to begin addressing the issue of assigning unique identifiers statewide. The Statewide Assessment reports that the State hopes to accomplish this task within Federal Fiscal Year 2007.

Item 6. Stability of foster care placement

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

All 40 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of Item 6. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the child experienced multiple placement settings during the period under review and, if so, whether the changes in placement settings were necessary to achieve the child's permanency goal or meet the child's service needs. Reviewers also assessed the stability of the child's current placement setting. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 6	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	7	16	10	33	**82.5**
Area Needing Improvement	3	4	0	7	**7.5**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

Performance on this item varied considerably across counties. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 80 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, and 70 percent Catawba County cases.

North Carolina's performance in 2005 on the individual measures of placement stability included in Composite 4: Placement Stability, is presented below.

- 55.3 percent of the children in foster care for less than 12 months experienced two or fewer placement settings (the national median for this measure was 83.3 percent),
- 32.4 percent of the children in foster care for at least 12 months but less than 24 months experienced two or fewer placement settings (the national median for this measure was 59.9 percent), and
- 11.7 percent of the children in foster care for at least 24 months experienced two or fewer placement settings (the national median for this measure was 33.9 percent).

Overall, North Carolina had one of the lowest percentages in the nation for all three measures. However, as noted in the discussion under Permanency Outcome 1, these percentages may reflect data quality problems rather than actual performance.

Item 6 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- The child did not experience a placement change during the period under review, and either the current placement was stable or the child was discharged from foster care during the period under review (23 cases).

- The placement changes experienced were in the child's best interest and were intended either to promote achieving the child's permanency goal or to provide specialized services to the child (9 cases). For example, placement changes were made to move the child to a relative's home or to an adoptive home.
- The child reentered foster care during the period under review and the agency placed the child with former foster parents (1 case).

Item 6 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or both of the following:
- The child was in multiple placement settings during the period under review, and at least one placement change was not planned by the agency to further attain the child's permanency goal (6 cases). In most of these cases, the child was moved due to behavior problems.
- The child's current placement setting was not stable (4 cases). This was usually due to the current caregiver's concerns about the child's behavior.

Additional findings of the case review were the following:
- Children in 27 cases experienced only 1 placement during the period under review.
- Children in 6 cases experienced 2 placements during the period under review.
- Children in 7 cases experienced 3 or more placements during the period under review.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Stakeholders commenting on this topic expressed differing opinions regarding placement stability for children in foster care. Some stakeholders reported that efforts are made to ensure appropriate matching of children with placements and to support the placements once children are placed. They indicated that short-term respite often is used to prevent moves when foster parents are experiencing problems coping with the children. In addition, several stakeholders reported that when placement changes occur, they are necessary for the best interests of the child.

Other stakeholders, however, suggested that there are problems with placement stability for children in foster care, particularly for older youth. They indicate that most placement changes are due to the child's behavioral problems. Nash County stakeholders suggested that placement instability often is due to the shortage of foster homes. Both Nash and Mecklenburg County stakeholders expressed the opinion that a lack of access to mental health evaluations and services results in placement changes because foster parents are providing care to children with mental health problems who are not receiving the services they need. Some stakeholders reported that because therapeutic homes are expensive, children often are in a number of different homes before they are placed in a therapeutic home.

One Mecklenburg County stakeholder noted that there is a payment issue involved in some placement changes. If a child needs a high level of therapeutic service and a provider is paid at a rate higher than the regular board rate, once the child's level of service declines, then the payment rate drops as well. This may result in a change in placement. This stakeholder noted that the agency is considering

ways to be more creative with the financing, such as exploring a blended rate, so that the child can remain with the same foster parents without the family experiencing a substantial financial change.

Rating Determination

Item 6 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 82.5 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that children experienced placement stability or that changes in placements were in the best interests of the child. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. Item 6 also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2001 CFSR. Overall, achieving placement stability appears to be more of a challenge in Catawba County than in the other two sites.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 97 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item and 98 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment reports that although these results are contrary to the data for the Federal outcome measures, there are several possible explanations for this difference. One possible explanation is that the interview process in the CFSR allows for further explanation and a determination of whether placement changes were appropriate. The measures reported in the data profile only assess whether there have been 2 or fewer placement changes during specified time periods, regardless of the reason for the change. Another possible explanation for the difference that was indicated in the Statewide Assessment concerns the quality of the State data regarding placement stability. The Statewide Assessment notes that the State believes that its AFCARS mapping regarding the number of placements was flawed and has re-programmed these data for the 2006B data submission and expects that data from FFY 2006 will more accurately reflect placement stability in North Carolina. In fact, as noted in the discussion above, the State's data on placement stability for FYY 2006 reflected in the most recent State Data Profile prepared by the Children's Bureau indicates considerable improvement in placement stability percentages. The change in percentages was discussed with the State and the reason for the change was verified. The change was due to errors in the reporting of placement changes to AFCARS in prior years.

It also was noted in the Statewide Assessment that the State suspects that social workers in the counties are not always coding placement moves correctly and are thus mistakenly inflating the number of placement moves children in DSS custody are experiencing. The State plans to revise its MIS and SIS system manuals to give clearer instructions to social workers and data entry clerks, as well as to begin conducting training on this issue early in 2007.

Item 7. Permanency goal for child

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

All 40 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 7. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had established a permanency goal for the child in a timely manner and whether the most current permanency goal was appropriate. The results of this assessment are shown below.

Item 7	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	5	17	10	32	**80**
Area Needing Improvement	5	3	0	8	**20**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 80 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, and 50 percent of Catawba County cases.

North Carolina's performance in 2005 with regard to the individual measures incorporated in Permanency Composite 3: Achieving permanency for children in foster care for extended time periods, was the following:

- 27.3 percent of the children in foster care for 24 months or longer at the start of the fiscal year were discharged from foster care to a permanent home (i.e., adoption, reunification with parents or other relatives, or guardianship) by the end of the fiscal year. This percent exceeds the national median for this measure of 25.0 percent for the dataset used to establish the national standards, but is less than the 75th percentile of 29.1 percent.
- 94.1 percent of the children exiting foster care in 2005 who were legally free for adoption at the time of exit were discharged to a permanent home. This percent is less than the national median for this measure (96.8 percent) for the dataset used to establish the national standards.
- 49.2 percent of the children who were discharged from foster care in 2005 with a discharge reason of emancipation had been in foster care for 3 years or longer at the time of discharge. This percent is slightly higher than the national median of 47.8 percent for the dataset used to establish the national standards. For this measure, lower scores indicate more positive performance.

Item 7 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the child's permanency goal was appropriate and had been established in a timely manner. The case was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one of the following:

- The child's current permanency goal was not appropriate given the case situation and the needs of the child (4 cases).
- The child's permanency goal was not established in a timely manner (4 cases).

For the four cases in which reviewers determined that the child's permanency goal was not appropriate, reviewers noted that the goal was maintained in the record even though there was little likelihood of the goal being achieved and minimal efforts were being made by the agency to achieve the goal. In all of these cases, the child actually "aged out" of foster care during the period under review. However, at the time of discharge from foster care, in three cases, the child's permanency goal was still guardianship, and in one case,

the permanency goal was still adoption, but no concerted efforts were made to achieve that goal. It may be that these goals were maintained because the agency does not allow the establishment of a permanency goal of alternative planned permanent living arrangement.

Case review findings pertaining to case goals were as follows:

- 13 children had a goal of adoption only.
- 2 children had a goal of Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement only.
- 7 children had a goal of reunification only (including living with other relatives).
- 9 children had a goal of guardianship only.
- 2 children had concurrent goals of adoption and reunification.
- 4 children had concurrent goals of reunification and guardianship.
- 3 children had concurrent goals of adoption and guardianship.

Case review findings pertaining to termination of parental rights (TPR) were as follows:

- At the time of the on-site review, 24 of the 40 children in the foster care cases had been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months.
- TPR had been filed in 10 of the 24 cases.
- A reason for not filing for TPR was noted in 13 of the 14 cases for which TPR had not been filed despite the 15-month criterion being met.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders in all CFSR sites indicated that reunification usually is the initial permanency plan unless there are extreme circumstances that would rule it out as a permanency option. However, they noted that other permanency options are considered well before children have been in foster care for 12 months. Stakeholders generally agreed that the agency uses concurrent planning on a frequent basis to ensure permanency for children, with concurrent goals usually being guardianship and adoption or reunification and guardianship. Mecklenburg County stakeholders indicated that concurrent planning often occurs on an informal basis before it is officially part of the case plan. Other strategies identified by stakeholders designed to promote permanency for children were the following:

- The agency makes concerted efforts to find relatives and fictive kin to serve either as caregivers while the child is in foster care or as guardians or adoptive parents if there is a goal change.
- The agency involves parents as part of the team in all permanency planning meetings.
- The agency implements what is called a Foster Care Blitz for children who have been in foster care for a significant amount of time (Catawba stakeholders).
- The availability of Drug Courts ensures that services are available for families, which further ensures that reasonable efforts can be demonstrated if a goal change is necessary (Mecklenburg County).

Although only a few stakeholders identified problems regarding DSS efforts to achieve permanency for children in foster care, several expressed the opinion that permanency, particularly through reunification, is hampered by the lack of involvement of some parents in the Child and Family Team meetings. In Nash County, stakeholders reported that because the State does not permit a goal of Long-Term Foster Care (or Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangements), goals such as guardianship or adoption are maintained in the case record even when the agency is aware that the child is likely to be discharged from foster care to independent living. In these situations, the agency will focus on preparing the child for independent living, although the goal remains the same.

Rating Determination

Item 7 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 80 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had established an appropriate permanency goal for the child in a timely manner. This percent is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. In the State's first CFSR, which was conducted in 2001, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Establishing appropriate goals for children in foster care in a timely manner appears to be a greater challenge in Catawba County than in the other sites. Nash County, in particular, performed well on this item.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 93 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, and 96 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also notes that North Carolina is in the second phase of a IV-E Waiver demonstration project involving subsidized guardianship. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, an increase in subsidized guardianship has been observed, and the majority of children achieving permanency through guardianship are teenagers. It was reported that 100 children have exited foster care to assisted guardianship and that 48 of these children were in Mecklenburg County.

The key strategies identified in the Statewide Assessment as effective in promoting permanency were conducting permanency planning early on in the case; the identification of relatives and fictive kin at the initial contact; the use of the child and family team meeting; concurrent planning; and shared decision making with the family, relatives, judges, attorneys, and guardians ad litem.

Item 8. Reunification, Guardianship, or Permanent Placement with Relatives

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 8 was applicable for 25 (62.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing these cases, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had achieved the permanency goals of reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives in a timely manner or, if the goals had not been achieved, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was in the process of making, diligent efforts to achieve the goals.

The results of this assessment are shown in the table below.

Item 8	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	4	6	7	17	**68**
Area Needing Improvement	3	4	1	8	**32**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**7**	**10**	**8**	**25**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	3	10	2	15	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

As shown in the table, performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 87.5 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 60 percent of Mecklenburg County and 57 percent of Catawba County cases.

North Carolina's performance in 2005 with regard to the national indicators for timeliness of reunification measures included in data composite 1—Timeliness and permanency of reunification—was as follows:

- 72.0 percent of the reunifications occurred in less than 12 months of the child's entry into foster care. This percentage exceeds the median of 69.9 percent for State performance on this measure for the data set used to establish the national standards.
- The median length of stay in foster care for children discharged to adoption was 6.4 months. This length of stay is about equal to the national median of 6.5 months for the data set used to establish the national standards for composite 1. (Note that lower number of months means higher performance.)
- 30.2 percent of children entering foster care in the last 6 months of 2004 were discharged from foster care to reunification within 12 months of entry into foster care. This percentage is less than the national median of 39.4 percent for State performance on this measure for the data set used to establish the national standards.

Performance on the fourth measure included in this composite pertains to foster care re-entry and is provided in the discussion of item 5. As indicated in that discussion, North Carolina has a very low re-entry rate, which was a major contributor to the State meeting the national standard for data composite 1.

Item 8 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the goal had been achieved in a timely manner or that the agency was making concerted efforts to achieve the goal in a timely manner. Item 8 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not made diligent efforts to achieve the goal in a timely manner. Six of the eight cases rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item had a goal of guardianship either as the sole permanency goal or as a concurrent goal.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders indicated that reunification is the initial goal in almost all cases, and that efforts are made to bring about reunification before other goals are considered. Stakeholders also noted that relatives are located early on in the case as potential resources for the child even if permanent placement with relatives or guardianship with relatives is not the goal. As a result, if the goal should change, there usually is a relative who may be considered for adoption or guardianship. Stakeholders in Nash County reported that the agency focused on placement with relatives and because of the State's "12 months to permanency" requirement, the agency was timely in achievement of this goal. The staff attorney and paralegal in Nash were reported to be instrumental in keeping track of timelines and moving the process forward.

Rating Determination

Item 8 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 68 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to attain the goals of reunification or permanent placement with relatives in a timely manner. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. However, Nash County exhibited a strong performance with regard to this item, with only one of eight applicable cases being rated as an Area Needing Improvement.

In the State's 2001 CFSR, there was no comparable item. At that time, item 8 pertained to independent living services. The change for item 8 from an assessment of independent living services to an assessment of timeliness of achieving goals of reunification, guardianship and permanent placement of relatives was not made until FFY 2002.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 99 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, and 99 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment notes that the agency stresses reaching out to relatives early on in each case. The structured intake tool used by the agency requires reporters to share information about any known relatives or kin. In addition, supervisors are expected to provide guidance to case workers with regard to targeting services to return children home, or to discharge them to the care of relatives. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the agency believes that the use of child and family teams, implemented during the State's Program Improvement Plan, allows for effective, front-loading of services and serves to ensure that child safety and permanency are community issues.

Item 9: Adoption

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 9 was applicable for 14 (35 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether diligent efforts had been, or were being, made to achieve finalized adoptions in a timely manner. The results are shown in the table below.

Item 9	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	4	4	2	10	**56**
Area Needing Improvement	3	4	1	8	**44**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**7**	**8**	**3**	**18**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	3	12	7	22	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

Variations in performance on this measure across sites are not meaningful to assess because of the small numbers, particularly in Nash County.

The following information describes North Carolina's performance on the individual measures included in the CFSR Data Composite 2: Timeliness of Adoptions:

- 38.9 percent of the children exiting to adoption were discharged in less than 24 months from the time of entry into foster care. This percentage exceeds the 75th percentile for this measure of 36.6 percent for the data set used to establish the national standards for the composite.
- The median length of stay in foster care for children adopted was 27.6 months. This median length of stay is about equivalent to the 25th percentile for this measure of 27.3 months for the data set used to establish the national standard for the composite. (Note that the lower the number of months, the higher the performance.)
- 22.2 percent of children in foster care for 17 months or longer on the first day of the year were discharged to a final adoption by the last day of the year. This percentage exceeds the national median for this measure of 20.2 percent for the data set used to establish the national standard for the composite.
- 14.2 percent of children in foster care for 17 months or longer on the first day of the year became legally free for adoption (i.e., there was a TPR for both mother and father) within the first 6 months of the year. This percentage exceeds the 75th percentile for this measure of 10.9 percent for the data set used to establish the national standard for the composite.
- 62.0 percent of children who were legally free for adoption were adopted within 12 months of becoming legally free. This percentage exceeds the 75th percentile for this measure of 53.7 percent for the data set used to establish the national standard for the composite.

Item 9 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the State had made diligent efforts to achieve finalized adoptions in a timely manner. Item 9 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in eight cases when reviewers determined that the State had not made diligent efforts to achieve a finalized adoption in a timely manner. In three of the eight cases, the adoption goal was changed to guardianship after the child had been in foster care for an extended period of time and no progress had been made. In one case, the child was discharged from foster care on her 18th birthday although the case goal remained as adoption. For the 13

Stakeholder Interview Information
Stakeholders were in general agreement that payments through the North Carolina Adoption Subsidy program and the Special Children Adoption Fund have expedited the adoption process. They also noted that the courts usually work in conjunction with the agency to expedite the adoption process. However, several stakeholders expressed the opinion that the lengthy appeals process for termination of parental rights extends the time period children are in foster care prior to adoption and also results in the disruption of some pre-adoptive placements. Additional information on stakeholder perceptions of the adoption process is provided under items 25, 26, 27, and 28 in the Systemic Factors section of the report.

Rating Determination
Item 9 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. Although the State meets the national standard for Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions, case reviewers determined that DSS had made diligent efforts to achieve adoptions in a timely manner in 56 percent of the cases. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. In the State's 2001 CFSR, item 9 was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 94 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, and 95 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 –June 2006 were rated as a Strength. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, during fiscal year 2005-2006, North Carolina recorded 1,420 public agency adoptions. The Statewide Assessment notes that these adoptions were accomplished by the efforts of public and private adoption agencies and represent children who are the beneficiary of the North Carolina Adoption Subsidy program. The Special Children Adoption Fund, created by the General Assembly in 1997, has proven to be another valuable resource to children within the child welfare system. The $3.1 million Fund can be accessed by local departments of social services and participating licensed adoption agencies when they exceed their adoption baseline numbers. During fiscal year 2005-2006, of the 1,420 total finalized adoptions, 346 adoptions were achieved as agencies exceeded their baselines and exhausted the Fund. In addition, The Special Children Adoption Incentive Fund continues to promote adoptions in North Carolina. This $500,000 appropriation from the General Assembly provides financial assistance to foster parents who are currently caring for children with more intensive needs and receive more than the standard foster care board rate to parent. This fund allows adoptive parents to receive the elevated board rate after the adoption, thereby removing the disincentive to adopt. Local county departments of social services and the State of North Carolina share in the monthly costs to administer this program. The Statewide Assessment notes that 108 children currently benefit from this program, with 14 being added during 2005-2006 fiscal year.

Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

__X__ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 10 was applicable for 2 (5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing these cases, reviewers were to determine if the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to assist children in attaining their goals related to other planned permanent living arrangements. The results are presented in the table below

Item 10	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	0	2	0	2	**100**
Area Needing Improvement	0	0	0	0	**0**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**0**	**2**	**0**	**2**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Case	10	18	10	38	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

Both of the applicable foster care cases were rated as a Strength for item 10 because reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to ensure a long-term placement for the child and to provide the necessary service to prepare the child for independent living. Although there were only two cases with this goal, in four additional cases, the child actually "aged out" of foster care to independent living during the period under review.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed positive opinions about existing independent living services. They noted that the LINKS Independent Living Program provides extensive supports to youth prior to and after transitioning from foster care to independent living and that some existing transitional living programs are strong. Mecklenburg County stakeholders indicated that the community, including the faith community, has taken an interest in supporting these youth and is seeking funds for an Independent Living Initiative to address the needs of these youth. Mecklenburg County stakeholders also reported that there is financial assistance for children who go to college.

Despite the positive views of existing services, stakeholders in Mecklenburg and Catawba counties also indicated that there are not enough services, that services are not provided early enough (they generally do not begin until the child turns 16), and that the funding is not sufficient to meet the needs of the children who will be expected to live independently once they are discharged from the foster care system. In contrast, stakeholders in Nash County expressed the opinion that services were sufficient in that county and that there were a number of independent living-related activities in the county for foster children ages 13 to 21. Stakeholder in that county expressed the opinion that the youth in the county had very positive perceptions of the LINKS program.

Rating Determination

Item 10 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 100 percent of the two cases, reviewers determined that the goal of other planned living arrangement was being addressed in an appropriate way. This percentage exceeds the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 97 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, while 83 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment notes that in North Carolina, DSS emphasizes the philosophy that all children are adoptable and county agencies have embraced this concept. It was reported that long-term foster care placement is not a goal for children in North Carolina and that this agency value is shared by stakeholders.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that since the 2001 CFSR, the LINKS program has been revised. LINKS is an outcome-based program that allows counties to use flexibility in designing and delivering services and resources within a framework based on best practices. The program is designed to help young adults exiting the foster care system to achieve seven positive outcomes: safe and stable housing; sufficient income to live on; sufficient education and vocational training to secure stable and meaningful employment; a support system of at least five caring and responsible adults who are involved with the young adult on a personal, rather than a professional level; avoidance of high risk behaviors; postponed parenthood until emotionally and financially able to parent; and access to needed health care (mental, physical and dental). Outcomes are monitored by county DSS staff and are reported annually via a survey.

Permanency Outcome 2

Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total**	**Percentage**
Substantially Achieved:	6	18	8	32	**80.0**
Partially Achieved:	4	2	2	8	**20.0**
Not Achieved or Addressed:	0	0	0	0	
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

STATUS OF PERMANENCY OUTCOME 2

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. The outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 80.0 percent of the cases, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied considerably across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 80 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 60 percent of Catawba County cases.

Key concerns from the 2001 CFSR

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with this outcome in its 2001 CFSR. However, during the 2001 review, all items incorporated in the outcome were rated as a Strength except for item 14, which pertains to preserving connections. To address the concerns relevant to item 14, North Carolina implemented the following strategies in its PIP.

- The State clarified standards and practice regarding visits between children in foster care and significant individuals and extended family members other than parents.
- The State instituted the practice of developing Life Books for children in foster care, which document the child's past experiences and the significant people in their lives.

Key findings from the 2007 CFSR

In contrast to the 2001 CFSR, in the 2007 CFSR, item 14 was rated as a Strength. Furthermore, the issues identified in the 2001 CFSR appear to have been resolved. There was evidence in the 2007 CFSR case reviews that the agency was making concerted efforts to maintain children's contact with extended family and other significant people in their lives, including visits and the development of Life Books. There also was evidence of efforts to maintain children's connections to their communities. However, in the 2007 CFSR, item 13 (visits with parents and siblings), item 15 (placement with relatives), and item 16 (maintaining the parent-child bond) were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. The primary case review findings with regard to these items were the following:

- There was a lack of consistency with regard to efforts to ensure sufficient visitation (or other forms of contact) between the children in foster care and their fathers (item 13).
- There was a lack of consistency with regard to agency efforts to search for relatives as potential placement options for children in foster care, particularly paternal relatives (item 15).
- There was a lack of consistency with regard to agency efforts to support the relationship between children and their fathers while the child was in foster care (item 16).

These findings suggest that the key concern with regard to this outcome pertained to a lack of effort in some cases to seek out absent or non-custodial fathers and to promote the involvement of fathers in general in their children's lives.

Despite these concerns, the case reviews also found the following:

- Children were routinely and consistently placed in close proximity to parents or potential permanent caregivers (item 11).

- Children were routinely and consistently placed with their siblings, unless there was a valid reason for separating siblings (item 12).
- The agency was effective in maintaining children's connections to extended family and communities. However, it was noted that the agency is not consistently exploring with the child and family possible Native American heritage (item 14).

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Permanency Outcome 2 are presented and discussed below.

Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement

__X__ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 11 was applicable for 30 (75 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases determined to be not applicable were those in which (1) TPR had been attained prior to the period under review, (2) contact with parents was not considered to be in the child's best interest, and/or (3) parents were deceased or whereabouts were unknown. In assessing item 11, reviewers were to determine whether the child's most current foster care setting was in close proximity to the child's parents or close relatives. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 11	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	8	14	7	29	**97**
Area Needing Improvement	0	1	0	1	**3**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**8**	**15**	**7**	**30**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	2	5	3	10	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

Item 11 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the child was placed in the same community or county as the parents or that the child's placement was not in the same community or county, but was still in close proximity to the parents. Item 11 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in one case when reviewers determined that the child was placed in another county because of a lack of adequate resources in the county where the child's family resided.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Stakeholders commenting on this item expressed the opinion that DSS keeps children in their same communities or counties when considering placement so that they are near parents. They noted that placement outside of the area usually occurs when a relative is located who does not live in the area, or when the child needs specialized treatment. However, some stakeholders in Nash County indicated that therapeutic placements or group home placements, because they are scarce, sometimes result in a child being moved out

of that county. Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that efforts are made to identify placements by zip codes and that some grant money received from a private foundation has been helpful in making placements in the same community. However, stakeholders in this county also reported than about 50 percent of children in foster care are placed within their own geo-districts.

Rating Determination
Item 11 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 97 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DSS had made diligent efforts to ensure that children were placed in foster care placements that were in close proximity to their parents or relatives, or that were necessary to meet special needs. This percentage exceeds the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength. In the State's 2001 CFSR, this item also was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 97 percent of 423 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, while 83 percent of 242 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment notes that County DSS agencies report that a child's needs, particularly for a high level of placement, sometimes require looking outside the community. The Statewide Assessment also notes that, since the 2001 CFSR review, Structured Decision Making tools have been implemented and out-of-home service agreements have been updated. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, each out-of-home service agreement must address the following issues with regard to placement: least restrictive, most family-like, closeness to home community and child's school district, whether or not it is a relative placement, and services of placement designed to meet the needs of children.

Item 12. Placement with siblings

_X___ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 12 was applicable for 21 (52.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable if the child did not have a sibling in foster care at any time during the period under review. In assessing item 12, reviewers were to determine whether siblings were, or had been, placed together and, if not, whether the separation was necessary to meet the needs (service or safety needs) of one or more of the children. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 12	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	4	12	3	19	**90**
Area Needing Improvement	0	1	1	2	**10**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**4**	**13**	**4**	**21**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	6	7	6	19	

Total Foster Care Cases	10	20	10	40	

Item 12 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- The child was in a placement with all siblings (9 cases).
- The child was in a placement with some siblings, and the separation from other siblings was determined to be in the best interests of one of the siblings (1 case).
- The child was not placed with any siblings, but the siblings were separated due to the special needs of one of the siblings (6 cases).
- The child was not placed with any siblings, but placement with siblings was not in the child's best interest (2 cases).
- The child was placed with some siblings but not others because the agency was unable to find a single placement for all six siblings (1 case).

Item 12 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined in one case that the agency had not made sufficient efforts to locate a placement for a sibling group of four children, and in another case that the agency had not made sufficient efforts to find a single placement for two siblings who were placed in different counties.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Stakeholders commenting on this topic expressed the opinion that DSS tries to place siblings together whenever possible and appropriate, but that large sibling groups present challenges to the agency. Stakeholders also noted that in some instances siblings are separated because one of the siblings is in an adoptive placement.

Rating Determination
Item 12 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 90 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency placed siblings together in foster care whenever possible and appropriate. This percentage meets the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. In the State's first CFSR, this item also was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 99 percent of 421 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as Strength for this item, and 99 percent of 229 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also notes that, since the 2001 CFSR, the out-of-home services agreement requires counties to document whether a child is placed with siblings, and if not, the agency must document the reason why siblings are not together and the efforts that are being made to ensure that siblings eventually are in the same placement setting.

Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 13 was applicable for 31 (77.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable for an assessment of this item if the child had no siblings in foster care and if one of the following conditions was met with regard to the parents: (1) TPR was established prior to the period under review and parents were no longer involved in the child's life (or parents were deceased), or (2) visitation with a parent was considered to not be in the best interests of the child. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine (1) whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to facilitate visitation between children in foster care and their parents and siblings in foster care, and (2) whether these visits occurred with sufficient frequency to meet the needs of children and families. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 13	**Catawba**	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total N**	**Percent**
Strength	3	14	6	23	**74**
Area Needing Improvement	4	2	2	8	**26**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**7**	**16**	**8**	**31**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	3	4	2	9	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 87.5 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 75 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 43 percent of Catawba County cases.

Item 13 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the frequency and quality of visitation with parents and siblings met the needs of the children (19 cases), or when visitation did not meet the child's needs, but the agency made concerted efforts to promote visitation (4 cases).

Item 13 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- The agency did not make concerted efforts to promote visitation with mother (3 cases).
- The agency did not make concerted efforts to promote visitation with siblings (3 cases).
- The agency did not make concerted efforts to locate or contact an absent father or a father in prison to involve him in visitation (6 cases).

The frequency of visitation with mothers, fathers, and siblings during the period under review is presented in the table below. As indicated in the table, in 46 percent of the cases in which visits with father were applicable, there were no visits during the period under review.

Visitation Frequency for Children in Foster Care (During the period under review)	**Mother (Number of cases)**	**Father (Number of cases)**	**Siblings in Foster Care**

			(Number of Cases)
Visits occurred at least on a weekly basis	11	2	4
Visits occurred less than weekly, but at least twice a month	6	1	5
Visits occurred less than twice a month, but at least once a month	6	2	1
Visits occurred less frequently than once a month	2	2	2
There were no visits during the period under review	1	6	2
Total cases for which item 13 was applicable	**26**	**13**	**14**

Stakeholder Interview Information
Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR were in general agreement that visitation occurs frequently between children in foster care and their parents and between siblings who are in foster care. Catawba and Nash County stakeholders reported that most visits take place at the county office and that visits typically are supervised. Mecklenburg County stakeholders noted that because of the Shared Parenting program, a program in which foster parents work with biological parents to co-parent the children, visits are very frequent and tend to be positive. Some Mecklenburg County stakeholders, however, expressed the opinion that youth do not have sufficient visitation either with parents or with siblings.

Rating Determination
Item 13 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 74 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to ensure that visitation was of sufficient frequency to meet the needs of the family. This percentage is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength. Ensuring sufficient visitation was a greater challenge in Catawba County than in the other CFSR sites. In the State's first CFSR, this item was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 99 percent of 421 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item and 99 percent of 229 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that these findings are not consistent with State findings from the stakeholder surveys conducted while developing the Statewide Assessment. In particular, as noted in the Statewide Assessment, 45.5 percent of the youth surveyed, did not agree with the statement that they were able to visit their family on a regular basis (36.6 percent agreed and 18.2 percent responded neutrally).

The Statewide Assessment also notes that the State's policy was revised after the 2001 CFSR to reflect the importance of maintaining the connections between parents and siblings. At present, visitation plans between siblings and parents must be developed within 1 week of children coming into care and out-of-home services agreements must document the visitation plan outlining the frequency of visits and prompting the team to consider visits with parent, caretaker, siblings, placement provider, other family members, or friends.

Item 14. Preserving connections

__X__ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 14 was applicable for 39 (97.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing item 14, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to preserve the child's connections to neighborhood, community, heritage, extended family, faith, and friends while the child was in foster care. This item is not rated on the basis of visits or contacts with parents or siblings in foster care. The results of the assessment are provided in the table below.

Item 14	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	8	17	10	35	**90**
Area Needing Improvement	2	2	0	4	**10**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**10**	**19**	**10**	**39**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	1	0	1	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 84 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 70 percent of Catawba County cases.

Item 14 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- The agency made concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections with extended family members and friends (e.g., through phone contact and visits) (23 cases).
- The agency made concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections with the child's religious or cultural heritage (4 cases).
- The agency made concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections with the school and community (e.g., selecting placements that do not require a change of school, jobs, friends, etc.) (11 cases).

Item 14 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determine that the agency did not make concerted efforts to maintain the child's connections to extended family (2 cases), or to the child's Native American Heritage, when it was identified (2 cases). There also was evidence in several cases that DSS is not consistent with regard to asking children and families about the possibility of Native American heritage.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Mecklenburg County stakeholders commenting on this item spoke mostly about compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act. They noted that the staff appears to be knowledgeable about ICWA and that the intake form has questions about race and ethnicity that helps to identify Native American heritage. In addition, training regarding ICWA was provided to agency attorneys. Stakeholders noted that the county usually uses placements that are recommended by the Tribe but that not all counties are equally knowledgeable about ICWA and not all judges are familiar with or respectful of ICWA.

Rating Determination
Item 14 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. Reviewers determined that, in 90 percent of the applicable cases, DSS has made concerted efforts to ensure that children in foster care maintained their connections to extended family, communities, schools, cultural heritage, and schools. This percentage meets the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength. In the 2001 CFSR, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 99 percent of 421 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength on this indicator, while 100 percent of 229 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that this is an area in which North Carolina can continue to improve because only 63.6 percent of the youth surveyed reported that they felt connected to their culture.

The Statewide Assessment indicates that the State's child welfare agency policies are intended to ensure compliance with ICWA. It was reported in the Statewide Assessment that the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is the only federally recognized Tribe in the State and that Swain, Jackson, Graham and Cherokee Counties work closely with the Cherokee Center for Family Services, Family Support Services Division in providing child welfare services. It also was reported in the Statewide Assessment that a workgroup comprised of representatives from the State Division of Social Services, the Tribe, and the directors from each of the four county departments of social services recently met to update an existing Memorandum of Agreement with the Tribe.

Item 15. Relative placement

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 15 was applicable for 35 (87.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable if relative placement was not an option during the period under review because: (1) the child was in an adoptive placement at the start of the time period, or (2) the child entered foster care needing specialized services that could not be provided in a relative placement. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives (both maternal and paternal relatives) as potential placement resources for children in foster care. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 15	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	7	17	5	29	**83**
Area Needing Improvement	3	2	1	6	**17**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**10**	**19**	**6**	**35**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Case	0	1	4	5	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**		

Performance on this measure varied somewhat across Sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 89 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 83 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 70 percent of Catawba County cases.

Item 15 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- The child was placed with relatives (13 cases).
- The child was not placed with relatives but the agency made diligent efforts to search for both maternal and paternal relatives (16 cases). In these cases, children were not placed with relatives either because a relative could not be found or because the relatives who were located were unable or unwilling to care for the children, lived too far from the parents, and/or had a criminal record or history of substantiated child maltreatment.

Item 15 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The agency had not made diligent efforts to search for either maternal or paternal relatives during the period under review (3 cases).
- The agency had made efforts to search for maternal relatives but not paternal relatives (3 cases).

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this topic were in general agreement that DSS initiates queries and searches regarding potential relative placements very soon after the child's entry into foster care and that this is required in State statute. Nash County stakeholders reported that genograms are used to help identify possible relatives. Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that the Intake and Research Unit helps with relative searches and that criminal and background checks are done on relatives before a child is placed.

Rating Determination

Item 15 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 83 percent of cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives as potential placement resources. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. In the State's 2001 CFSR, this item was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the percentage of children entering relative care as the initial placement has increased from 21 percent in 2001 to 27 percent in 2005. State biennial CFSR results indicate that of 421 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 100% were rated a strength in this outcome measure and 100% of 229 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength.

Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 16 was applicable for 35 (87.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. A case was not applicable if (1) parental rights had been terminated prior to the period under review and parents were no longer involved with the child, or (2) a relationship with the parents was considered to be not in the child's best interests throughout the period under review. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to support or maintain the bond between children in foster care and their mothers and fathers through efforts other than arranging visitation. The results of this assessment are provided in the table below:

Item 16	**Catawba**	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total N**	**Percent**
Strength	3	11	4	18	**72**
Area Needing Improvement	4	2	1	7	**28**
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	**7**	**13**	**5**	**25**	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	3	7	5	15	
Total Foster Care Cases	**10**	**20**	**10**	**40**	

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 85 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 80 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 43 percent of Catawba County cases. However, this variation is difficult to interpret because of the small number of applicable cases, particularly in Nash County.

Item 16 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the agency made concerted efforts to support and/or strengthen the bond between parents and children. Examples of DSS efforts to promote bonding between the child and parents included enrolling the family in a Nurturing/Parenting class that involves both parents and children, providing family therapy for parents and child, inclusion of parents in making medical decisions for the child, encouraging parents to attend medial appointments with the child and school activities, enlistment of foster parents and biological parents in the Shared Parenting program, using supervised visits to improve parenting skills and address the relationship between parents and children, encouraging contact via mail and telephone with incarcerated parents, encouraging continued relationships even after adoption finalization.

Item 16 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The agency did not make concerted efforts to support relationship with father (5 cases).
- The agency did not make concerted efforts to support relationship with mother (2 cases).

Stakeholder Interview Information

Many stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR reported that parents often are encouraged to attend medical appointments with the child, team decision-making meetings, and school meetings and activities. Mecklenburg County stakeholders noted that the Shared Parenting program is effective in supporting, or creating, a bond between parents and children. Some stakeholders indicated that transportation often is a barrier to involving the parents more frequently in the child's day-to-day activities.

Rating Determination

Item 16 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 72 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to support the parent-child relationships of children in foster care. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. A key concern is the lack of effort to support the father-child relationship. In the State's 2001 CFSR, this item was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial results indicate that 100 percent of 421 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength in this outcome measure, and 98 percent of 229 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also notes that feedback from the State Collaborative stakeholders regarding this item stresses that it is important to preserve the respect of the parent in the child's eyes and facilitate the transition of the child.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Well Being Outcome 1

Outcome WB1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total**	**Percentage**
Substantially Achieved:	4	23	14	41	**63.1**
Partially Achieved:	11	6	3	20	**30.8**
Not Achieved or Addressed:	2	2	0	4	**6.1**
Total Applicable Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	
Not Applicable Cases	0	0	0	0	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 1

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 63.1 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 95 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied considerably across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 82 percent of Nash County cases and 74 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, compared to 24 percent of Catawba County cases. Performance also varied based on the type of case. The outcome was found to be substantially achieved in 70 percent (28 cases) of the 40 foster care cases compared to 52 percent (13 cases) of the 25 in-home services cases.

Key concerns from the 2001 CFSR

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with this outcome during its 2001 CFSR. For the 2001 CFSR, two items incorporated in this outcome were rated as Areas Needing Improvement: item 17 (pertaining to needs and services of children, parents and foster parents) and item 18 (pertaining to child and family involvement in case planning).

Key concerns identified in the 2001 review were the following:

- In-home service cases involving families with adolescents presented significant challenges both in identifying services needs and in providing services to meet identified needs.
- In-home service cases appeared to focus on an "identified child" rather than focusing on the family as a whole.
- There was a lack of involvement of parents and children (when appropriate) in the case planning process.
- Some areas of concern with regard to in-home families pertained to domestic violence in the home and these concerns were not identified and addressed adequately.

North Carolina implemented the following PIP strategies to address these concerns:

- North Carolina redesigned in home services to adopt a family-centered approach rather than a child-centered practice.
- The State implemented the wrap around services of the System of Care approach to improve both the assessment of services needs and the State's capacity to meet those needs.
- The State also clarified policy regarding children's involvement in case planning to include children, particularly older youth, in their case planning.
- Case plan tools were redesigned to promote active family involvement in the case planning process.
- The State redesigned its in-home services program, including developing standards to ensure greater family involvement and more frequent contacts with children and parents.
- Developed a policy for the LINKS-Independent Living Program that requires a specification of desired outcomes and a tracking of county performance in achieving those outcomes.

North Carolina was determined to have met its PIP objectives with regard to this outcome.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

Similar to the 2001 CFSR, in the second round of the CFSR, items 17 and 18 continued to be rated as Areas Needing Improvement. However, the concerns identified in the 2001 CFSR were addressed to some extent. The 2007 CFSR case reviews indicate that DSS has clearly adopted a family-centered approach to child welfare casework, which is particularly apparent in the implementation of the Child and Family Team Meetings and in the consideration of the needs and services of all children in the family in the in-home services cases. The 2007 CFSR case reviews also found a high level of involvement of mothers and youth in the case planning process. Finally, the State appears to have successfully developed partnerships between the agency and domestic violence service providers, although several stakeholders expressed concern that the current reorganization of mental/behavioral health services has resulted in a decline in the availability of domestic violence services for the families served by DSS.

Despite these improvements, the following concerns remained with regard to items 17 and 18:

- A lack of consistency with regard to concerted efforts to assess and meet the services needs of parents, particularly fathers (item 17), although the agency was effective in assessing and meeting the service needs of children and foster parents.
- A lack of consistency in efforts to seek fathers and engage them in the case planning process (item 18), although the agency was effective in involving mothers and youth in case planning.

In contrast to the 2001 CFSR, in the 2007 CFSR items 19 and 20 also were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. However, for item 19 (caseworker contacts with children), although the percentage was under the required 90 percent for an overall rating of Strength, it was very close to that (88 percent) and the cases of concern were primarily limited to Catawba County. For item 20, the key concern identified in the case reviews was a lack of consistency with regard to agency efforts to search for and make contact with fathers (item 20).

Other findings relevant to this outcome were the following:

- A high level of effectiveness with regard to agency efforts to assess and meet the services needs of children and foster parents.
- A high level of effectiveness with regard to agency efforts to involve children and mothers in case planning.

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 1 are presented and discussed below.

Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 17 was applicable for all 65 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had (1) adequately assessed the needs of children, parents, and foster parents; and (2) provided the services necessary to meet those needs. This item excludes the assessment of children's (but not parents') needs pertaining to educational, physical health, and mental health needs. These are addressed in later items. The case review results were the following:

Item 17	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	8	23	14	45	**69**
Area Needing Improvement	9	8	3	20	**31**
Not applicable	0	0	0	0	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 82 percent of Nash County cases and 74 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, compared to 47 percent of Catawba County cases. Performance also varied somewhat based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 75 percent (30 cases) of the 40 foster care cases, compared to 60 percent (15 cases) of the 25 in-home services cases.

Item 17 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the needs of children, parents, and foster parents had been adequately assessed and that identified service needs had been met. Item 17 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that there was either inadequate assessment of needs or inadequate services to meet identified needs.

Specific case review findings for item 17 are shown in the table below. These data suggest that the agency is highly effective in assessing and meeting the needs of children (95 percent) and foster parents (93 percent). However, for the cases reviewed, the agency was less effective in assessing and meeting the needs of parents, particularly fathers.

Item 17: Table of Needs Assessment and Services	Evaluation Results		No. of Applicable Cases
	No	Yes	
Mother's needs assessed and met?	8 (16%)	41 (84%)	49
Father's needs assessed and met?	13 (42%)	18 (58%)	31
Foster parent's needs assessed and met?	2 (7%)	26 (93%)	28
Child's needs assessed and met?	3 (5%)	57 (95%)	60

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the agency focuses on meeting children's needs and generally is effective in that arena. They also noted that although DSS makes concerted efforts to ensure that needs are assessed, it often is a challenge for the agency to access the services to meet some of the needs. A few stakeholders identified

independent living services as an area where DSS is not consistent in meeting children's needs, primarily because there are insufficient services for the large number of children who need them.

Stakeholders also suggested that parents' needs are assessed as part of the child and parent team meetings. However, they noted again, that, while the agency routinely identifies services needs pertaining to substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence, it often is difficult to meet these needs either because the services are not available or the parents are resistant to accessing services.

Rating Determination
Item 17 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 69 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the State had adequately assessed and addressed the service needs of children and parents. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2001 CFSR. Assessing and meeting the needs of parents appears to be particularly challenging for Catawba County.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, the 2001 CFSR revealed that meeting children's well-being needs was an area where the Stated needed to improve. As a result, policy regarding well-being was implemented, SDM tools were implemented to assess well-being needs, and service agreements were required to document well-being needs. The Statewide Assessment notes that the Child and Family Team model of intervention, which incorporates community partners as well as children and families, and the MRS approach, have resulted in connecting families with needed services early in the life of the case. The Statewide Assessment also reports that State biennial CFSR results indicate that 93 percent of 778 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, and 95 percent of 433 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, safety, strengths and needs, and risk are assessed early on and routinely throughout foster care and in-home services cases and there are no real differences in DSS' intervention with foster care and in-home cases.

Item 18. Child and family involvement in case planning

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Item 18 was applicable for 64 (99 percent) of the 65 cases. A case was not applicable if parental rights had been terminated prior to the period under review and parents were not involved with the child in any way, and the child was too young or had cognitive delays or other conditions that were barriers to participation in case planning. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether parents and children (if age-appropriate) had been involved in the case planning process, and if not, whether their involvement was contrary to the child's best interest. A determination of involvement in case planning required that a parent or child had actively participated in identifying the services and goals included in the case plan. This assessment produced the following findings:

Item 18	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	7	24	16	47	**73**
Area Needing Improvement	10	6	1	17	**27**
Total Applicable Cases	**17**	**30**	**17**	**64**	
Not Applicable Cases	0	1	0	1	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Performance on this item varied extensively across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 94 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 80 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, and 41 percent of Catawba County cases. Performance also varied substantially based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 82 percent (32 cases) of the 39 applicable foster care cases, compared to 60 percent (15 cases) of the 25 in-home services cases.

Item 18 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that all appropriate parties had actively participated in the case planning process or that the agency had made concerted efforts to involve them in the case planning process. The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not made concerted efforts to involve the mother, father, and/or child (when age appropriate) in the case planning process. Key findings with regard to this item were the following:

- There were 52 cases in which involvement of the mothers in the case planning process was applicable for assessment. Reviewers determined that the agency made concerted efforts to involve mothers in case planning in 92 percent of these cases.
- There were 36 cases in which involvement of the fathers in the case planning process was applicable for assessment. Reviewers determined that the agency made concerted efforts to involve fathers in 58 percent of these cases.
- There were 42 cases in which involvement of the children in the case planning process was applicable for assessment. Reviewers determined that the agency made concerted efforts to involve children in case planning in 90 percent of these cases.

These data indicate that for the most part the agency is not consistent with regard to involving the fathers in the case planning process. A key concern relevant to this issue pertains to a lack of concerted effort to locate absent or non-custodial fathers. For the most part, if the father had been actively involved with the child on an ongoing consistent basis, DSS made efforts to engage him in the case-planning process. However, this was not always done.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most of the stakeholder comments regarding involvement of parents in case planning is presented under item 24 in the Systemic Factor of Case Review System. In general, stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that parents and children are involved in case planning through the Child and Family Team meetings. Stakeholders suggested that most youth generally are involved in developing and/or changing their case plans and believe that their opinions are taken into account. However, this was not noted to be true for all youth in foster care.

Rating Determination
Item 18 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 73 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to involve parents and/or children in the case planning process. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. The key concern with regard to this item pertains to the lack of involvement of fathers in the case planning process in several cases. The agency appears to make concerted efforts to involve mothers and children, when age appropriate. In general, Nash County appears to be more effective than the other sites with regard to involving fathers in the process. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 91 percent of 778 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, while 89 percent of 433 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated a Strength. The Statewide Assessment notes that DSS promotes involvement of children and parents in case planning through the Child and Family Teams practice. However, a survey conducted by the State and reported in the Statewide Assessment found that 54.6 percent of youth surveyed reported feeling included as a valued member of the child and family team. In addition, of the 122 telephone surveys conducted with caregivers from the 7 MRS counties by Duke University, 60 percent of the caregivers said that they felt that their ideas were taken seriously and included in plans for their family, over 50 percent said they "felt good" about the way they were treated by their social worker, over 50 percent agreed that the social worker(s) tried to understand their family's situations and needs, and over 50 percent said that the social worker asked for their ideas about what would be best for their family.

Item 19. Worker visits with child

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 19 was applicable for all 65 foster care cases. In conducting the assessment of this item, reviewers were to determine whether the frequency of visits between the caseworkers and children was sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being and whether visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. The results of the assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 19	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	11	29	17	57	**88**
Area Needing Improvement	6	2	0	8	**12**
Not applicable	0	0	0	0	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**		

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Nash County cases and 94 percent of Mecklenburg County cases, compared to 65 percent of Catawba County Cases. However, performance on the item did not vary substantially based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 90 percent (36 cases) of the 40 foster care cases and 84 percent (21 cases) of the 25 in-home services cases.

Item 19 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and children were sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being and promote attainment of case goals. Item 19 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The frequency of caseworker visits was not sufficient to meet the needs of the child and the visits did not focus on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment (5 cases).
- The frequency of caseworker visits with children was not sufficient to meet the needs of the child, although when visits did occur, they were substantive (2 cases).
- The frequency of caseworker visits was sufficient, but the visits did not focus on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment (1 case).

Specific information from the case reviews is presented in the table below.

Typical Frequency of Caseworker Visits with Child	Foster Care Cases (Number and Percent)	In-Home Services Cases (Number and Percent)
Visits occurred on at least a weekly basis	5 (12.5%)	0
Visits occurred less than weekly, but at least twice a month	14 (35%)	20 (80%)
Visits occurred less than twice a month, but at least once a month	17 (42.5%)	2 (8%)
Visits occurred less frequently than once a month	4 (10%)	3 (12%)
Total cases	**40**	**25**

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR reported that children are seen by the agency caseworker at least once a month, and usually more often. They noted that this is required in policy and has been a standard of practice since the mid-1990s. Mecklenburg stakeholders noted, however, that some youth report they do not see their caseworkers frequently and often when visits do occur, youth report that the visits tend to be quick and "not helpful."

Rating Determination

Item 19 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 88 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that caseworker visits with children were of sufficient frequency and/or quality. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher

required for a rating of Strength. However, in both Mecklenburg and Nash Counties, 90 percent or more of the cases were rated as a Strength for this item. It was only in Catawba County that concerns were noted with regard to caseworker visits with children.

Although this item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR, for that first review, an item could receive an overall rating of Strength if 85 percent of the cases were rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, since the 2001 CFSR Review, policy was developed to ensure that appropriate face-to-face contact occurs with children in both foster care and in-home services cases. The policy establishes a hierarchy of need with in-home services, and requires more frequent visits with families who are rated higher risk. Visits with children and parents in the in-home services cases occur in the family's home, in order to fully assess family functioning and environmental issues.

The Statewide Assessment reports that State biennial CFSR results indicate that 89 percent of 778 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, while 86 percent of 433 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength.

Item 20. Worker visits with parents

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 20 was applicable for 51 (78 percent) of the 65 cases. Cases were not applicable for this assessment if parental rights had been terminated prior to the period under review and parents were no longer involved in the lives of the children. All cases that were not applicable were in-home services cases. Reviewers were to assess whether the caseworker's face-to-face contact with the children's mothers and fathers was of sufficient frequency and quality to promote attainment of case goals and/or ensure the children's safety and well being. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 20	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	3	18	12	33	**65**
Area Needing Improvement	11	6	1	18	**35**
Total Applicable Cases	**14**	**24**	**13**	**51**	
Not Applicable Cases	3	7	4	14	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 92 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 75 percent of Mecklenburg County, and 21 percent of Catawba County cases. There was little variation, however, based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 65 percent (17 cases) of the 26 applicable foster care cases and 60 percent (15 cases) of the 25 in-home services cases.

Item 20 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that visits occurred with sufficient frequency to meet the needs of parents and children **and** that visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. Item 20 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- Visits with the mother were not of sufficient frequency or quality (7 cases).
- Visits with the mother were not of sufficient frequency, although the quality was good (3 cases).
- Visits with the mother were of sufficient frequency, but not quality (1 case).
- Visits with the father were not of sufficient frequency, but the quality was good (1 case).
- Visits with the father were not of sufficient frequency or quality (11 cases).

Additional information from the case reviews is provided below.

Typical Frequency of Caseworker Visits with Parents	**Foster Care Cases**		**In-Home Services Cases**	
	Mother	**Father**	**Mother**	**Father**
Visits occurred on a weekly basis	3	0	0	0
Visits occurred less than weekly, but at least twice a month	7	2	18	5
Visits occurred less than twice a month, but at least once a month	9	1	3	6
Visits occurred less frequency than once a month	6	4	3	5
There were no visits during the period under review	1	5	1	3
Total Applicable Cases	**26**	**12**	**25**	**19**

Stakeholder Interview Information

Many stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite review expressed the opinion that caseworkers are conducting frequent visits with parents.

Rating Determination

Item 20 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 65 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the frequency and/or quality of caseworker visits with parents were sufficient to monitor the safety and well-being of the child or promote attainment of case goals. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. In the State's first CFSR, this item was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, agency policy mandates the frequency of face-to-face contact with parents in foster care and in-home cases. The policy was identified as having the following requirements: For in-home cases in which the risk is rated as high or intensive, weekly face-to-face contact shall be maintained with the family. All children substantiated as abused, neglected, or dependent, or identified as "services needed" and their parents or primary caretakers shall be seen face-to-face two times per month. All other children (unsubstantiated or found "services recommended" or "services not recommended") residing in the home shall be seen face-to-face 1 time per month.

The Statewide Assessment reports the following with regard to State biennial CFSR results: 88 percent of 778 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, and 81 percent of 433 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength.

Well-Being Outcome 2

Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total**	**Percentage**
Substantially Achieved:	13	22	13	48	**96.0**
Partially Achieved	1	0	1	2	**4.0**
Total Applicable Cases	**14**	**22**	**14**	**50**	
Not Applicable Cases	3	9	3	15	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 2
North Carolina achieved substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2. Reviewers determined that 96.0 percent of the cases reviewed substantially achieved this outcome. This percentage exceeds the 95 percent or higher required for substantial conformity. Performance on this item was high for all sites.

Key Findings of the 2001 CFSR
The State was not in substantial conformity with this outcome for the 2001 CFSR. At that time the key concerns relevant to this item were the following:

- In some of the cases reviewed, adolescents with a history of expulsions, multiple repetition of grades, multiple school changes, mental health issues, and pregnancy were unlikely to complete school, but the agency did not provide the services necessary to address these concerns.

- The communication between DSS and the educational system often was not effective. In particular, information sharing between DSS and the schools was less likely to occur in the in-home cases than in the foster care cases.
- In the in-home services cases, caseworkers were not conducting assessment of children's potential educational needs.

To address these concerns, the State implemented the following strategies in its Program Improvement Plan:
- Developed an assessment structure that addresses educational needs in addition to other family issues.
- Implemented the System of Care (SOC) concept in child welfare to strengthen partnerships with the Department of Public Instruction (as well as other agencies) to ensure that individualized services pertaining to education are identified and delivered in a timely way.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR
In contrast to the 2001 CFSR, the results of the 2007 CFSR indicate that the State is in substantial conformity with Well Being Outcome 2. As indicated in the discussion of item 21 below, the concerns identified in the 2001 CFSR listed above were for the most part resolved by the time of the 2007 CFSR due to the strategies implemented in the Program Improvement Plan.

Item 21. Educational needs of the child

__X__ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 21 was applicable for 50 (77 percent) of the 65 cases reviewed. Cases were not applicable if any of the following applied: (1) children were not of school age; or (2) children in in-home cases did not have service needs pertaining to education-related issues. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether children's educational needs were appropriately assessed and whether services were provided to meet those needs. The results of this assessment are provided below.

Item 21	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	13	22	13	48	**96**
Area Needing Improvement	1	0	1	2	**4**
Total Applicable Cases	**14**	**22**	**14**	**50**	
Not applicable	3	9	3	15	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Item 21 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the child's educational needs were appropriately assessed and services were provided, if necessary. Item 21 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in two cases when reviewers determined that the agency had not followed up on education-related issues that were of concern.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR praised the relationship between the agency and the schools. The strength of the relationship was attributed in part to the involvement of the State education agency in State Collaborative for Children and Families. School personnel are invited to child and family team meetings, information is provided to schools on a timely basis, and many services are being offered in the schools. Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that there are educational liaisons located in the schools and this helps with communication and a flow of information between the schools and the agency. Nash County stakeholders reported that the school system has been good about providing tutors for children, even during the summer months, and speech therapists. Stakeholders also noted that foster parents play an important role in advocating for children with the school system and ensuring that children get the services that they need.

Rating Determination
Item 21 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 96 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to meet the educational needs of children. This percentage exceeds the 90 percent required for the item to be rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 99 percent of 542 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, and 99 percent of 271 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment notes that the child's educational needs are assessed throughout the life of the case and are documented on SDM tools, service agreements, and in the case record. An Education Status Component is an element of a comprehensive assessment and must be completed within 7 days of the initial placement. It also must be updated at least every 6 months or when circumstances change, and be given to initial and subsequent placement provider(s) within 7 days of placement.

Well-Being Outcome 3

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Catawba	**Mecklenburg**	**Nash**	**Total**	**Percentage**
Substantially Achieved:	10	25	13	48	**78.7**
Partially Achieved:	3	2	1	6	**9.8**
Not Achieved or Addressed:	3	2	2	7	**11.5**
Total Applicable Cases	**16**	**29**	**16**	**61**	
Not Applicable:	1	2	1	4	

Total Cases	17	31	17	65	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 3

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 78.7 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 95 percent required for substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied considerably across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 86 percent of Mecklenburg County cases and 81 percent of Nash County cases, compared to 62.5 percent of Catawba County cases. Performance also varied based on the type of case reviewed. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent (36 cases) of the 40 applicable foster care cases, compared to 57 percent (12 cases) of the 21 applicable in-home services cases.

Key Concerns from the 2001 CFSR

North Carolina did not achieve substantial conformity with this outcome in its 2001 CFSR and was required to address the outcome in its Program Improvement Plan. In the 2001 review, item 22, pertaining to the physical health of the child, was rated as a Strength, but item 23, pertaining to the mental health of the child, was rated as an Area Needing Improvement.

At the time of the 2001 CFSR the key concerns found with regard to this outcome were the following:

- In a high percentage of in-home services cases, the child's mental health needs were either not identified or were identified, but no services were provided.
- There were insufficient mental health services and the managed care system made it difficult to access the services that were available because of funding restrictions.

The State implemented the following strategies in its PIP to address these concerns:

- Implemented the System of Care approach involving building partnerships with the Division of Mental Health (as well as other agencies) to ensure the provision of wraparound services for children and youth who were at the highest risk of placement due to mental health issues or delinquent behaviors.
- When placement was necessary, made efforts to promote placement and permanency for children with behavioral mental health needs in family settings in the community.

The State met its goals with regard to this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

The findings of the 2007 CFSR were similar to those of the 2001 CFSR. That is, item 22 (children's physical health needs) was rated as a Strength, and item 23 (children's mental health needs), was rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Despite the State's PIP implementation efforts, the key concerns identified in the 2007 CFSR are similar to those noted in the 2001 CFSR. In particular:

- Meeting the mental health needs of children was a greater challenge in the in-home cases than in the foster care cases.

- The State continues to struggle with problems accessing mental health services and with ensuring high quality services, although this was noted to be more of a concern for children who remain in their homes than for children in foster care. Many of these problems were attributed to the ongoing reforms in the mental health/behavioral health service system.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 3 are presented and discussed below.

Item 22. Physical health of the child

__X__ Strength ___ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 22 was applicable for 52 of the 65 cases reviewed. Cases that were not applicable were in-home services cases in which physical health concerns were not an issue. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) children's physical health needs (including dental needs) had been appropriately assessed, and (2) the services designed to meet those needs had been, or were being, provided. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 22	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	9	26	12	47	**90**
Area Needing Improvement	4	0	1	5	**10**
Total Applicable Cases	**13**	**26**	**13**	**52**	
Not Applicable Cases	4	5	4	13	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of applicable Mecklenburg County cases and 92 percent of applicable Nash County cases, compared to 69 percent of Catawba County Cases.

Item 22 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children's health needs (medical and dental) were routinely assessed and services provided as needed. Item 22 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The child had identified needs for medical services that were not met (3 cases).
- DSS was not involved in identifying children's health needs or providing services to address those needs (2 cases).

Three of the cases rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item were foster care cases and two were in-home services cases.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Several stakeholders commenting on item 22 during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the medical needs of children in foster care are being routinely assessed and addressed. Mecklenburg County stakeholders noted that there is an early intervention program

for children under age 3 years with the Department of Public Health that has been very positive in terms of identifying and addressing health needs, particularly developmental delays.

Despite the generally positive opinions, Catawba and Mecklenburg County stakeholders expressed concern about children receiving dental services, and youth having to pay for dental services because there are not enough providers that will accept Medicaid. In contrast, Nash County stakeholders reported that accessing dental services was not a problem in that county. Stakeholders there noted that that the agency has worked with area dentists to ensure that they are willing to accept Medicaid payments, and works collaboratively with dental schools to ensure sufficient access to dental treatment.

Rating Determination

Item 22 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 90 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency was adequately addressing the health needs of children in foster care and in-home services cases. This percentage meets the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. However, concerns remain regarding Catawba County's performance on this item. In the State's 2001 CFSR, this item also was rated as a Strength.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that 99 percent of 746 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item, while 97 percent of 412 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that survey data from youth in foster care indicated that 77.3 percent said that they were taken to the doctor when they were sick.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina agency policy requires a comprehensive assessment of children's physical health needs. When a child is alleged to have a medical condition, disease, or illness, relevant to the allegation, the agency must consult the medical provider treating the condition. The Statewide Assessment reports that county agencies have access to the Child Medical Evaluation Program (CMEP)/Child Mental Health Evaluation Program (CHMEP) for medical assessments and children must be referred for a physical examination within 1 week of initial placement. Children under age 3 who are substantiated or found in need of services are referred locally for an early intervention assessment.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that foster parents often take children to medical appointments and are considered partners with the agency in meeting children's physical health needs. Foster parents are given the Health Status Component of the Out of Home Family Services Agreement to take with them to medical appointments and other medical or social history information that impacts the delivery of health care services. The Statewide Assessment notes that this information must be given to the foster parents prior to, or at the time of, the child's placement.

Item 23. Mental health of the child

____ Strength __X_ Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings
Item 23 was applicable for 50 (77 percent) of the 65 cases reviewed. Cases were not applicable if the child was too young for an assessment of mental health needs, or if there were no mental health concerns. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) mental health needs had been appropriately assessed and (2) appropriate services to address those needs had been offered or provided. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 23	Catawba	Mecklenburg	Nash	Total N	Percent
Strength	11	18	12	41	**82**
Area Needing Improvement	3	4	2	9	**18**
Total Applicable Cases	**14**	**22**	**14**	**50**	
Not Applicable Cases	3	9	3	15	
Total Cases	**17**	**31**	**17**	**65**	

There was less variation in performance on this item across sites than was found for performance regarding physical health. The item was rated as a Strength in 86 percent of applicable Nash County cases, 82 percent of applicable Mecklenburg County cases, and 79 percent of Catawba County Cases. However, performance varied considerably based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 94 percent (31 cases) of the 33 applicable foster care cases, compared to 59 percent (10 cases) of the 17 applicable in-home services cases.

Item 23 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children's mental health needs were appropriately assessed and the identified mental health needs were addressed.

Item 23 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or more of the following:
- Mental health needs were not assessed nor addressed (8 cases).
- Mental health needs were assessed but not met (1 case).

Stakeholder Interview Information
Many of the stakeholder comments pertaining to mental health services are provided in the Systemic Factors section under the factor of Services Availability. In general, there were many stakeholders in all sites who expressed concern about the availability of mental health services under the new mental health system that has been established in the State. Stakeholders also expressed concern about the quality of the services that are available. Nash County stakeholders, in particular, expressed concern about gaps in services, inability to access services, delays in services, and inadequate follow up on concerns identified through assessments. Mecklenburg County stakeholders were generally more positive than stakeholders in the other sites about mental health services, and suggested that

the county's System of Care grant was addressing some of the problems. However, some Mecklenburg County stakeholders expressed concerns about the timeliness of mental health evaluations.

Catawba County stakeholders expressed differing opinions regarding mental health services. One stakeholder suggested that accessing these services is not a problem because they are provided by Family Net, which is part of the county child welfare agency. However, other stakeholders questioned the responsiveness of Family Net to crisis situations and the quality of services provided.

Ratings Determination

Item 23 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 82 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to address the mental health needs of children. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR. The substantial difference in performance based on the type of case suggests that mental health services (both evaluations and interventions) may be easier to access when children are in foster care than when they remain in their own homes.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, since the 2001 CFSR, the MRS implementation coupled with the use of SDM tools has affected North Carolina's ability to meet children's mental/behavioral health needs. For in-home service cases that are substantiated or found in need of services, an assessment of the child/family's mental health/behavioral health needs must occur. The social worker must document whether the child/family is receiving appropriate treatment for any identified mental health needs and if not, what efforts the agency will take to obtain such treatment. North Carolina's policy also requires that children in foster care placements receive services to address their emotional and developmental needs. Children shall also receive services that help mitigate the feelings of grief and loss that result from removal from the home. Completion of the Child Health Status Component is required and includes an assessment of any developmental/learning problems, significant behavioral problems and diagnosis of mental disorder/emotional illness. The Health Status Component is completed for each child entering care within 7 days of the initial placement, is updated at least every 6 months or as circumstances change, and shared with the placement provider within 7 days.

The Statewide Assessment reports that State biennial CFSR results indicate that 96 percent of 746 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005 were rated as a Strength for this item and 97 percent of 412 cases reviewed from July 2005 – June 2006 were rated a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also reports that 86.3 percent of foster youth who completed a survey, reported that they agreed with the statement that they were taken to the therapist/counselor when necessary.

SECTION B: SYSTEMIC FACTORS

This section of the CFSR Final Report provides information regarding the State's substantial conformity with the seven Systemic Factors examined during the CFSR. Information for the items included in each systemic factor comes from the Statewide Assessment and from interviews with stakeholders conducted during the onsite CFSR. A score for substantial conformity is established for each systemic factor. In addition, information is provided regarding the State's performance on each systemic factor for the State's first CFSR. If the systemic factor was part of the State's Program Improvement Plan (PIP), the key concerns addressed in the PIP and the strategies for assessing those concerns would be noted, as well as any changes in ratings that occurred as a result of the State's second CFSR. However, North Carolina was found to be in substantial conformity with all of the CFSR Systemic Factors in its 2001 CFSR, and therefore was not required to address any of them in its PIP.

I. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		**Substantial Conformity**	
Rating	1	2	**3X**	4

STATUS OF STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

North Carolina is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Statewide Information System. North Carolina was found to be in substantial conformity with this item during its first CFSR. Findings for the item assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 24. State is operating a statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care.

__X____ Strength ____Area Needing Improvement

Item 24 is rated as a Strength because the State has a system in place that can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for children in foster care. However, the State recognizes that the information system would be enhanced by the

creation of an automated child welfare case management and information tracking system. This item was rated as a Strength in the State's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina does not have a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System. Instead, the State maintains four major information systems that provide child-welfare relevant data. However, a broad-based information system—the North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology (NCFAST)—has been in the planning phase for 8 years. This system is designed to provide data management for nine programs within the Department of Health and Human Services, including child welfare, and will integrate the four existing child welfare data systems. DSS reports that the Request for Proposals to implement NCFAST should be published by June of 2007. The implementation of Phase 4, which includes most of the required child welfare functionality, is expected to conclude in 2010.

Information in the Statewide Assessment suggests that there are two key challenges for the State pertaining to child welfare systems data. One challenge is that the multiple data bases, which are not connected to one another, make it difficult to ensure consistent and accurate data across the systems. The other challenge is the lack of a single statewide and cross-system child identifier. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, each county assigns a unique identifying number for a child when the child is entered into one of the management information systems. Therefore, children cannot be tracked across data bases or across counties. As a result, a child in one county who enters and leaves the care of DSS and subsequently reenters care in another county, will have been assigned two different identification numbers and will appear in the management information system as entering foster care for the first time. This practice has a negative impact on the State's ability to accurately collect, analyze, and report on performance. DSS has been working for some time to address these challenges.

One approach to addressing the challenges has been to move all of the data to a data warehouse. The Statewide Assessment notes that since the last review, data from three of the major information systems have been made available through the data warehouse. This was reported to have a positive impact on data collection, analysis, and reporting. Also, Management Information System user manuals and forms have been placed on the DSS website to facilitate access by county offices.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic of discussion in 18 stakeholder interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. Stakeholders' comments were generally consistent with the information in the Statewide Assessment. They noted that there are four major information systems currently in operation in the State—(1) a services information system, which provides eligibility information and demographics; (2) a child payment and placement system, which is the source for data submitted to AFCARS; (3) a central registry, which contains CPS information and is a source for NCANDS; and (4) an adoption indexing system, which has information on adoption. Stakeholders' comments also were consistent with information in the Statewide Assessment regarding the State's plans to move the data to a data warehouse. Stakeholders expressed the opinion that this move already is improving county access to data. They noted that in the future the data warehouse will increase the accuracy of the performance

reports. As one stakeholder noted, "Once all of the data are moved to the data warehouse, counties will have access to data on a 24/7 basis."

Stakeholders reported that the State can track the status, demographic characteristics, location and goal for the placement of children in foster care through the Child Placement and Payment System. Stakeholders indicated that there is a project underway to establish unique identifiers for children to improve tracking of children across counties. Stakeholders generally agreed that the lack of a unique identifier for a child is a significant barrier to sharing information and reporting on performance. A few stakeholders said that because of the lack of a unique identifier, if the child changes counties, it makes it difficult for that county to obtain a service history or foster care history on the child. Also, if a family comes from another county, the local county has to access the central registry to determine if the family had agency contact in the other county and then has to request records from the county. Nash County stakeholders suggested that if a child from their county is placed in another county, they cannot track the location of the child.

II. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2 X	3	4

STATUS OF CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

North Carolina is not in substantial conformity with the factor of the Case Review System. North Carolina was rated as being in substantial conformity with this factor during its first CFSR. Therefore, it was not required to address this factor in its Program Improvement Plan (PIP). The following items were rated as a Strength in the 2001 CFSR, but were rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the 2007 CFSR:

- Item 25, pertaining to the development of case plans and the involvement of parents in the case planning process.
- Item 28, pertaining to the process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

Specific findings for each item included in this systemic factor and the reasons for item ratings are presented below.

Item 25. Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child's parent(s) that includes the required provisions.

____ Strength _X____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 25 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Although the State has established a process to include parents in developing case plans, it does not appear to be fully implemented, as evidenced by the CFSR case review ratings. Case ratings indicate that there is a particular need for the State to focus on engaging parents in case planning in the in-home services cases and on engaging fathers in both in-home services and foster care cases. This item was rated as a Strength in the State's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, all children who are served by the agency must have a case plan and the case plan must be developed with the parent in accordance with a standardized format whenever the State is providing involuntary services to protect children, prevent removal, or effect reunification. The Statewide Assessment notes that the State's implementation of the Systems of Care (SOC) principles provides a foundation for the agency expectation that children and families should be integral members of their own case planning processes.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, as a result of North Carolina's Program Improvement Plan, case plan forms were revised to ensure greater family and child involvement in the planning process. The new case plan form was designed with an emphasis and focus on parental strengths. It has a section in which parents can write their comments, and it requires the parents' signatures, and the signature of the child, if it is age appropriate. Parents and age-appropriate children participate in the determination of the services necessary to remediate the family problems that brought them into contact with the agency. North Carolina policy requires that this plan be reviewed with the parents at least every 90 days in order to evaluate progress.

The Statewide Assessment notes that as part of the State's Program Improvement Plan, DSS implemented Child and Family Team Meetings (CFT) to improve child and family involvement in case planning. County DSS agencies use CFT meetings to engage parents and age-appropriate children, other persons identified by the family who are committed to the child and family and are invested in helping them change, and, if the child is in foster care, the foster parents. The meetings produce decisions regarding what is needed to assist a family to develop the capacity and capability to assure the child's health and safety and to meet the child's well being needs. The team remains active with the family throughout the life of the case. In child placement cases, the State also has implemented Shared-Parenting meetings that further encourage parent involvement in case planning. Shared-Parenting meetings are a time for the social worker, birth parents and foster parents to meet and discuss the care of the child when out-of-home placement is necessary. These meetings occur within one week of a child being placed in foster care.

Despite the focus on parent and child involvement in case planning, the Statewide Assessment notes that survey responses from youth indicate that they do not perceive themselves as involved in the development of their case plans.

As reported in the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR results indicate that of 778 cases reviewed from July 2003 – June 2005, 91 percent were rated as a Strength on Item 18, child and family involvement in case planning, while 89 percent of 433 cases reviewed between July 2005 – June 2006 were rated as a Strength. North Carolina's onsite review instrument looks at the use of case plans by social workers. The onsite review instrument addresses whether a plan is completed with the family and evaluates the level of participation of those involved in developing the case plan. Reviewers evaluate whether the children age 12 years and older and the mother and father sign the plans. Reviewers also assess whether the strengths and needs of the family are identified and documented by the social worker, whether particular services directed at the targeted needs of the family are identified and utilized by the family members, and whether the progress made by the family members during the time period that the case is open is assessed.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic in 25 interviews. There was consensus among stakeholders that the agency develops case plans in a timely manner and that, for the most part, parents are involved in the case planning process. Stakeholders in all counties indicated that parent involvement in case planning is an expectation of the State and identified several strategies used by the State to promote involvement, including shared parenting meetings, CFTs, System of Care principles, and One Child One Plan approach for children involved with multiple agencies. However, stakeholders in Catawba County indicated that there are challenges in involving children in case planning and that some youth do not seem to know what is in their case plans and report that they were not involved in the development of the plan.

Stakeholders in Nash County reported that they use special tools in the CFTs to encourage the involvement of the child. They have a tool called an "emotions grid" that they ask children to complete. Nash County stakeholders also noted that the agency has a format that permits children to provide input into the plans if they do not want to attend the CFT. Stakeholders in Nash County also noted that the county has a dedicated caseworker who prepares children and parents for participation in the family conference and, consequently for participation in development and ongoing management of the case plan.

Item 26. Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child, no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review.

__X___ Strength ____Area Needing Improvement

Item 26 is rated as a Strength because the State has a process in place for cases to be reviewed by the court at a minimum of every 6 months. Stakeholders note that cases often are reviewed every 3 months. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina law and DSS policy require a court review within 90 days of the date of the dispositional hearing and every 6 months thereafter. However, in many judicial districts reviews are scheduled as frequently as every 3 months. The Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts is committed to the judicial branch's role in meeting the Federal guidelines of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, and has communicated this to all local district court judges. Each county is provided with a monthly report with information about each child's court review status. This gives the county the ability to monitor policy and statute compliance. DSS Children's Program Representatives also can use the report as a tool for consultation with counties and case selection for monitoring. IV-E monitoring and biennial reviews have confirmed that counties are aware of the requirements of reviews and are complying.

However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that the courts may waive review hearings; may require written reports to the court by DSS in lieu of review hearings; or may order that review hearings be held less often than every 6 months if the court finds by clear, cogent, and convincing evidence that any of the following apply: the juvenile has resided with a relative or been in custody of another suitable person for at least 1 year; the placement is stable and in the juvenile's best interest; neither the juvenile's best interest or rights of any other party require a hearing every 6 months; all parties are aware that the matter may be brought before the court for review at any time by filing of a motion for review; and the court order has designated the relative or other suitable person as the juvenile's permanent caretaker or guardian of the person of the juvenile.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina currently has Family Court programs in eleven districts covering 18 counties. A major goal of Family Court is to coordinate all case management and service agency efforts for a single family in distress. Family Courts offer a more consistent, efficient use of trial time for these cases. Expectations are that it will benefit children in that cases will be settled in shorter times and the process will not add to the family's conflicts. Under the Family Court concept, local alternative dispute resolution programs, such as mediation, are used frequently to resolve the issues without the court becoming involved with family matters. For families facing multiple legal issues, Family Court provides referrals to mediators, counselors, or classes that may help families reach their own acceptable resolutions without having a judge make the decision for them. The judge becomes the last resort if there is no resolution.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite review, item 26 was a topic of discussion in 23 interviews, many involving multiple participants. Most stakeholders were in general agreement that reviews are held at least every 6 months and often every 3 months. All reviews in North Carolina are held by the court. However, several stakeholders indicated that often there are difficulties in reviewing cases because of court schedules and the lack of a sufficient number of judges. They noted that sometimes cases are continued, but, more often, too many cases are scheduled on one day. This results in situations in which a case will be extended for several days, which is a hardship for working parents who have to keep coming back.

Item 27. Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the State has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter.

__X__ Strength _____Area Needing Improvement

Item 27 is rated as a Strength because the State has a process in place for ensuring that children have permanency hearings no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter. Stakeholders noted some delays and continuances, but indicated that most permanency reviews take place in a timely manner. The State has put improvements in place to ensure timely hearings, such as increasing the number of judges in some counties. This item was rated as a Strength in the States 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, a permanency planning hearing in court is required by law within 12 months of a child entering care and every 6 months thereafter. If the plan for reunification is discontinued, a permanency planning hearing is required by law within 30 days of that decision. However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that in a survey of legal and judicial stakeholders, 73 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that permanency hearings are held in a timely manner and 47 percent indicated that judges' workloads do not allow for the timely initiation of hearings or for the conduct of full and thoughtful hearings.

Stakeholder Interview Information
This item was a topic of discussion in 17 interviews during the onsite CFSR, many of which involved multiple participants. State level and Catawba County stakeholders reported that although permanency hearings are taking place for all children, and most of them are occurring in a timely manner, some are not. Key concerns expressed by these stakeholders pertained to the granting of continuances, crowded court dockets, the workloads of agency attorneys, and the need for more GALs. It was noted, however, that there were differences across judges with regard to the granting of continuances.

In contrast, Nash County stakeholders were in general agreement that permanency hearings in that county are held by the court in a timely manner and that they are substantive in content. Stakeholders in Mecklenburg County also indicated that permanency hearings in that county were routinely held in a timely manner and that the agency has worked closely with the courts to promote timely hearings. They noted that one successful strategy was to provide feedback to the courts in the form of data regarding the timeliness of hearings. In addition, the county increased the number of judges.

Item 28. Provides a process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

____ Strength ___X__Area Needing Improvement

Item 28 was rated as a Area Needing Improvement. While the State has a process in place for filing termination of parental rights (TPR) for children who have been in foster care, in both the Statewide Assessment and the on-site review, stakeholders identified concerns with timely filing of TPR and/or timely achievement of TPR. Key concerns were court scheduling, the lengthy TPR appeals process, and the reluctance of some agency attorneys, caseworkers, and judges to seek TPR, particularly for older children. This item was rated as a Strength in the 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina exceeds the ASFA requirements for TPR, requiring that when a child has been in placement out of the home for 12 of the most recent 22 months, a proceeding to terminate parental rights must be initiated unless certain conditions exist. The time in placement is tracked through the Child Placement and Payment System and counties receive reports on this issue on a regular basis. The Statewide Assessment notes that TPR is generally a two-part decision for the court. First, the agency must show by clear, cogent, and convincing evidence the existence of one or more grounds for TPR. Second, even if these grounds exist, the decision to TPR must be determined by the court to be in the child's best interest.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, State biennial CFSR review results found that of 423 cases reviewed between June 2003 and July 2005, 93 percent were rated as a Strength on item 7, which addresses filing a TPR for children who have been in foster care 15 of the past 22 months. In addition, 96 percent of 242 cases reviewed between July 2005 and June 2006 were rated as a Strength. The Statewide Assessment also notes that North Carolina's data profile presents evidence that timely termination of parental rights is a Strength for the State.

Although procedures are in place for seeking TPR, the Statewide Assessment notes that there are some areas of the State where there is a resistance to seeking TPR by the agency and by the court system. Although this was described in the Statewide Assessment as a fairly isolated situation and not representative of the State as a whole, the results of the survey of legal stakeholders suggests that there is room for improvement in the TPR process. Examples of some findings of this survey are as follows:

- 46.7 percent of the respondents expressed agreement with a statement that the agency files TPR petitions within 15 months of a child's placement into foster care; 43.3 percent of respondents disagreed with this statement.
- 46.7 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that TPR hearings and findings are typically completed within a reasonable time after filing the petition; 46.7 percent of respondents disagreed with this statement.

The Statewide Assessment also notes that some respondents to the survey said that some judges are reluctant to change a case plan to adoption, particularly when the case plan involves an older child. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, one respondent wrote "My biggest problem is that some judges are of the belief that older children are not adoptable, and will therefore be too hesitant to change the plan of care of an older child to TPR/adoption."

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic of discussion in 19 interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. Although stakeholders noted that North Carolina has a TPR standard of 12 months rather than 15 of the most recent 22 months, there was general agreement among State-level stakeholders and stakeholders in Catawba and Mecklenburg Counties that this standard is not met on a consistent basis. Several stakeholders suggested that the petitions are filed in a timely manner, but not heard quickly, although a few stakeholders also questioned whether petitions are filed in a timely manner. Stakeholders reported the following barriers to seeking and achieving TPR in a timely manner:

- There are an insufficient number of judges, which makes it challenging to get a TPR hearing scheduled in a timely manner.
- There often are delays in adjudication hearings, and these delays further extend the timeframe for seeking TPR.
- Some DSS attorneys and staff question whether a child is "adoptable," or would be "successful" in an adoptive home, and therefore are reluctant to seek TPR or provide compelling reasons for not seeking TPR.
- Some judges are unwilling to TPR older children because of a fear of creating legal orphans.
- Large caseworker caseloads make it difficult to ensure that caseworkers have sufficient time to work with parents in order to justify the TPR petition.

Stakeholders at the State level and in Mecklenburg and Catawba Counties also were in agreement that permanency is delayed because of the number of TPR appeals and the length of time to resolve an appeal. As one stakeholder noted, when an appeal is filed, it may be 12 to 18 months from the time of notice of the appeal to its completion.

Nash County stakeholders indicated that they did not experience delays in either filing or achieving TPR in that county. They noted that TPR filings are granted by the courts because the agency is well-prepared. Stakeholders in this county did not report delays due to TPR appeals. However, one stakeholder noted that the court is more reticent to grant TPR for a child when there is not an adoptive resource.

Item 29. Provides a process for foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child.

__X__ Strength _____Area Needing Improvement

This item was rated as a Strength because the State has a process in place for timely notification of foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers regarding reviews and hearings, and most stakeholders agreed that the process is implemented effectively. The item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State has a process for the timely notification of all parties to judicial reviews, including foster parents and youth age 12 years or older. The Clerk of the Court is required to provide parties with a 15-day notice of the scheduled judicial review. In some counties innovative solutions have been found to ensure that foster parents have an opportunity to be heard when they cannot be present for hearings and/or reviews. These include dissemination of a questionnaire that can be completed by caretakers or written reports from caretakers in which detailed information regarding the child and any recommendations and/or concerns are provided to the court. Although the State has a process in place for notification of hearings, both biennial and CPR reviews have found that there is variability between the counties as to how and when notification is accomplished. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, the Administrative Office of the Court plans to suggest changes to the juvenile code in 2007 to clarify statute related to notification.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Item 29 was a topic of discussion in 20 stakeholder interviews held during the onsite CFSR. There was general agreement among stakeholders that foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers are notified of hearings and reviews in a timely manner (at least 2 weeks prior to the hearing). There was less agreement about who is responsible for the notification. Although the Statewide Assessment indicates that the Clerk of the Court is responsible for this process, Mecklenburg County stakeholders said that notification was done by caseworkers. Nash County stakeholders reported that the paralegals in the agency inform the court and the court does the notification. Some Catawba County stakeholders thought that the agency attorneys sent the notice, but others said that the attorneys are not responsible for this task. Still other stakeholders in Catawba said that foster parents usually get a call from the case worker, but other stakeholders said that this is not a consistent practice among case workers.

Stakeholders also were in general agreement that foster parents, relative caregivers, and pre-adoptive parents are given full opportunity to be heard in any hearings and reviews, and in fact, are encouraged to attend and participate by the caseworkers, judges, and Guardians ad Litem (GALs). In Catawba County, stakeholders noted that the judge typically wants to hear from foster care providers, but foster parents are concerned that delays and postponements in the court system make it difficult for them to participate, because they have to go to court and sit all day and then the case is postponed.

III. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		**Substantial Conformity**	
Rating	1	2	**3X**	4

STATUS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

North Carolina is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Quality Assurance System. During the first round of the CFSR, North Carolina also was found to be in substantial conformity with this systemic factor. Findings with regard to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 30. The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children.

__X__ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 30 is rated as a Strength because the State has implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services. Stakeholders noted that, in general, the State has sufficient standards to ensure the safety and health of children in care. This item was rated as a Strength during the State's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, State law NCGS 108A -74 is designed to strengthen State supervision of county DSS child welfare programs and to ensure that services are appropriately provided to achieve safe, permanent homes for children in the State. The legislation allows the Secretary of Health and Human Services to take action to ensure the delivery of child welfare services in accordance with State laws and applicable rules. The Secretary may invoke this statute as a result of poor performance on a Biennial Review, serious concerns uncovered by a fatality review, or any other measurable method of inadequate agency performance.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Item 30 was a topic of discussion in 12 interviews during the onsite CFSR. Stakeholders noted that, in general, the State has sufficient standards to ensure the safety and health of children in foster care, including standards pertaining to physical health care for children. Stakeholders in the various counties indicated a number of local-level requirements that also are intended to support the safety and health of children in foster care. These included licensing standards for foster homes and requirements for visits to foster homes by caseworkers. Stakeholders in all counties indicated that caseworkers and licensing staff visit foster homes at least once a month. Mecklenburg and Nash County stakeholders reported that that the State Quality Assurance staff is working with the Jordan Institute at the University of North Carolina to develop a safety list to assist licensing staff in what to look for when they conduct monitoring visits.

(deletion)

Item 31. The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluates program improvement measures implemented.

__X__ Strength ___ Area Needing Improvement

Item 31 is rated as a Strength. The State has implemented a quality assurance case review system similar to the Federal CFSR. Reviews are conducted biennially and formal Program Improvement Plans are completed by every county for any outcome areas that are not in substantial conformity. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Although the State is operating an identifiable quality assurance (QA) system, the findings of the 2007 CFSR raise questions regarding the State's QA process. Specifically, the State's ratings for the majority of individual items were extremely high and differ considerably from the federal 2007 CFSR case review findings. As a result, there is a concern that the State's QA case review system may not be effective in identifying the strengths and needs of the service delivery system, and therefore may not result in an accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of program improvement measures.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, after the 2001 CFSR and the State's entrance into Program Improvement Status, DSS suspended their existing Quality Assurance process and spent 2 months completely redesigning the review protocol, process, and instruments to mirror the Federal CFSR. The redesigned process, protocol and instruments were implemented in October 2001, and the Biennial Review process became officially known as the Child and Family Services Review. The North Carolina Child and Family Services Review not only uses the Federal case review instrument, but also uses the Federal CFSR procedures incorporating interviews with parents, placement providers, age-appropriate children, social workers, supervisors and other professionals involved with the families. The North Carolina CFSR also collects information from stakeholders through surveys.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the North Carolina Child and Family Services Review process is designed to measure outcomes and practice and to provide public accountability for all county DSS agencies and for the Children's Services System statewide. The reviews provide a mechanism for evaluating the Children's Services System's response to children and families; for identifying management, training, system and policy issues; for recognizing strengths in practice; and for making recommendations to strengthen the delivery of all children's services programs statewide.

A team of reviewers consisting of DSS staff from the Child and Family Services Review Team and the CPR for the county being reviewed partnered with staff from the county DSS during the onsite review process. The number of teams participating in the on-site review depends on the level of the county, but can vary in size from three to six teams with two people on each team. Full team debriefings are conducted on each case, as in the Federal Review process. Formal Improvement Plans are required from each county in any outcome area that does not achieve substantial conformity.

A draft report containing the results of the Child and Family Services onsite review is submitted to the county DSS within 30 days of completion of the onsite review process for their review, input and response within 10 working days of receipt of the draft report.

When the official report is released, the county DSS, with consultation from their CPR, develops and submits a Program Improvement Plan to the Division, within 30 days of the date of the final written report, that addresses the areas identified as needing improvement. The CPR monitors the agency's progress, and when the goals of the PIP are met, the Division notifies the agency in writing of their removal from PIP status.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the items needing the most improvement statewide include the four items related to Safety Outcomes 1 and 2. Also, Item 7 under Permanency Outcome 1, related to the appropriateness of the permanency goals for children and meeting the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requirements for filing termination of parental rights (TPR), as well as Item 9, which deals with timely adoptions for children with the permanency goal of adoption were significant areas in need of improvement statewide. All four items under Well Being Outcome 1 were identified as needing special attention statewide, as well as item 23 under Well Being Outcome 3, which focuses on whether children are receiving adequate services to meet their mental health needs. As during the last biennium, no county failed to achieve substantial conformity in all outcome areas.

As a part of the Child and Family Services Review process, each county DSS submits a self-survey and is asked to include discussion in the self-surveys about improvements made by the agency since the last Child and Family Services Review, strengths identified by the agency, their use of data resources for self-evaluation, and areas that the agency needs to improve.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Item 31 was a topic of discussion in 12 stakeholder interviews during the onsite CFSR. In general, stakeholders were familiar with the State's CFSR reviews and had favorable perceptions of the review process. They suggested that the QA process is used to guide staff training, which is developed and implemented in collaboration with universities in the State. Catawba County stakeholders also reported that the local agency conducts surveys with parents and other service recipients regarding their perceptions of how they were treated by the agency. Mecklenburg County stakeholders indicated that they have a five-member QA team in the county and that supervisors review five cases each month and conduct home visits with workers to observe interactions. Nash County stakeholders did not comment on the State CFSR, but reported that they have a policy requiring a monthly review of all cases for a year for all new workers. After the first year, three cases are pulled for review on a quarterly basis (unless there is a need to review more cases). Feedback is given to the caseworkers, and training is identified. Nash County stakeholders also reported that the agency has an active in-house and institutionalized QA process that is also the core for staff development and that they do monthly status reports on a Survey of Customer Satisfaction.

IV. TRAINING

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity		
	Not in Substantial Conformity	**Substantial Conformity**

Rating	1	2	3	**4 X**

STATUS OF TRAINING

North Carolina is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of training. The State also was rated as in substantial conformity with this systemic factor in its 2001 CFSR. Findings with regard to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 32. The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the CFSP, addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training for all staff who deliver these services.

___X__Strength _____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 32 is rated as a Strength because the State mandates pre-service training before caseworkers have direct client contact and the State has a comprehensive training system in place to meet this requirement. New supervisors must complete this training in addition to 54 hours of supervisory training. This item also was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, in August 1997, the General Assembly passed a law that makes 72 hours of pre-service (prior to direct client contact) and 24 hours of in-service training for all county DSS child welfare services staff and supervisors mandatory. The Statewide Assessment notes that North Carolina has not experienced any problems meeting this statutory mandate and that staff are completing the required pre-service and in-service training. It was noted that participation in training is tracked through a database managed by the DSS Staff Development Team. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the mandatory pre-service prior to direct client service has become a way of life for county staff.

The Statewide Assessment also notes that, in addition to providing the training, DSS is working to measure the "learning" of the training participants. The Pre-Service Training (PST) Knowledge Assessment, a 68-item instrument designed to measure PST participant learning, was finalized, and the assessment and reporting process began in March 2004 and continued throughout 2005. The Knowledge Assessment is administered to PST trainees at the end of training. It is a requirement for successful completion of the training program. Regional Training Center (RTC) administrative personnel send the answer sheets to a university, where they are scanned and scored. Score reports are then sent to the RTC administrative staff person to forward on to the trainee's supervisor as a

part of the feedback package. During 2005, 467 PST trainees took the Knowledge Assessment and had their scores reported to their supervisors.

Information in the Statewide Assessment suggests that the requirement of 72 hours of pre-service training may be waived if the new worker has been part of the North Carolina Child Welfare Education Collaborative (the Collaborative). This is a joint effort of North Carolina social work education programs, the North Carolina Division of Social Services, and other partners such as the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services and the North Carolina Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. Established in 1999, the Collaborative strengthens public child welfare services by increasing the number of well trained and highly committed BSW and MSW social workers employed in local departments of social services. Offering specialized educational opportunities emphasizing public child welfare practice, the Collaborative provides financial support for selected social work students who will commit to work in a North Carolina county department of social services. While they are in school, Collaborative students (child welfare scholars) satisfy all requirements for the state-mandated child welfare pre-service training. Collaborative students can begin field placement with a county department of social services without having to take the 72-hours pre-service course, and agencies can hire these students as fully qualified for child welfare social work positions and do not have to incur the expense of pre-service training.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic of discussion in 16 stakeholder interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. Stakeholders confirmed the information in the Statewide Assessment regarding the requirement of 72 hours of pre-service training prior to a caseworker assuming a caseload and at least 72 hours of pre-service training for supervisors. There was general agreement that caseworkers do not receive a case until they have completed the training. County-level stakeholders identified additional new-worker training offered at the county level. This included training on local agency forms and programs, on legal issues, and on working with law enforcement. Mecklenburg County stakeholders noted that special investigators, in particular, have to go through additional training at the local level. Stakeholders in all counties indicated that the agency relies heavily on supervisors to act as coaches and mentors to new workers throughout the caseworker's first year. Stakeholders in all counties also praised the quality of the supervisors in the local agencies. Stakeholders noted that new supervisors have to take the same training as caseworkers and then 54 additional training hours on introduction to supervision.

A few stakeholders expressed concern that the pre-service training was too general and did not address the specifics of each type of caseworker position. They noted that this usually was left up to the mentor or the supervisor once the caseworker began receiving cases. They suggested that pre-service is focused more on knowledge than on skills, so the skills-based training does not really take effect until the caseworker is working a case. They felt that more time was needed for "shadowing" before a caseworker was given a case. This would allow the worker to develop skills and internalize knowledge. Stakeholders also suggested that there needs to be a greater focus on using assessment tools, documenting practice, and how to conduct family-friendly assessments.

Item 33. The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP.

_X___ Strength _____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 33 is rated as a Strength because the State has requirements in place for ongoing training and makes available a comprehensive array of training to meet the needs of staff. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a law that not only makes 72 hours of pre-service (prior to direct client contact) training mandatory, but also makes it mandatory that all county DSS child welfare services staff and supervisors participate in 24 hours of in-service training annually.

The Division has established an annual training Institute that has served almost 800 staff across all 100 county Departments of Social Services in the past 2 years. Each Institute is a 3-day learning event focused on skills-based training on aspects of the seven strategies of MRS reform and emerging practice. National speakers as well as local experts lead intensive sessions on topics ranging from forensic interviewing, secondary trauma, facilitating Child and Family Teams, family-centered domestic violence intervention, and more. The Institute is an extension of the overall statewide learning system. Plans for the 2007 and 2008 statewide Institutes are already underway and will expand the number of staff trained by about 400 in 2007 to about 600 in 2008.

Stakeholder Interview Information
Item 33 was a topic of discussion in 17 stakeholder interviews during the onsite CFSR. Many of the interviews involved multiple participants. Stakeholders were in general agreement that caseworkers receive at least 24 hours additional ongoing training after the pre-service training. They noted that there are a variety of training topics and options, including computer-based training, that are available to caseworkers. Caseworkers are notified about training opportunities via e-mail and can make a request to their supervisors to attend a particular training. Sometimes the training topics are selected by the supervisors based on their reviews of cases. Stakeholders reported that ongoing training can be challenging for foster care staff because of time constraints. For example, they are expected to be in court at least one day a week. Nash County stakeholders reported that accessing the State-offered training can be a challenge because it is necessary for county staff to travel long distances to participate in these training opportunities. Mecklenburg County stakeholders said that they need more training resources because it is such a large county.

Stakeholders also provided additional comments regarding the ongoing training opportunities:
- Members of the Tribal social services staff can attend DSS trainings if they are interested.
- Statewide training partnership includes 28 State staff and 50 + contracted trainers through universities and training vendors.

- Foster parents and families are being involved in developing and delivering training.
- In 2004, DSS established a strategic plan to conceptualize the training component as a learning environment rather than a training system.

Item 34. The State provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children.

_X___ Strength _____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 34 is rated as a Strength because the State has implemented MAPP-GPS and all foster and adoptive parents must complete the training. In addition, the State provides opportunity for ongoing training, including an annual conference and specialized training, such as a 3-day program called *Helping Youth Reach Self-Sufficiency.* This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina provides pre-service training as well as continuing education for foster and adoptive parents. The State uses the *Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting: Group Preparation and Selection Series (*MAPP-GPS*)* as the primary curricula. DSS teaches the curricula to social workers who in turn teach it to prospective and current foster and adoptive parents. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, because the Division is responsible for training county staff to deliver certain components of the foster and adoptive parent training program, the frequency and effectiveness of the training may vary across the State. The Statewide Assessment notes that there is a need for DSS to evaluate foster and adoptive parent satisfaction and learning in the future.

MAPP/GPS participants prepare for the role of foster and/or adoptive parenting by taking part in 10 parent group meetings facilitated by the MAPP/GPS trainers. Participants also have individual family consultations with the trainers. Agency trainers and parents work together to develop the families' abilities in relation to 12 key skills. The number of training days for MAPP/GPS in 2005 was 96 compared to 75 training days in 2001. This represents almost a 25 percent increase in training days during this period. DSS has received positive feedback from foster parents and social workers about the usefulness of MAPP/GPS training: 99.9 percent of participants rank their training experience as high or very high and 98 percent of participants state that their knowledge has significantly increased as a result of the training.

The Division offers two other in-service trainings to social workers, so that they may teach them to current foster and adoptive parents: *Fostering and Adopting the Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused (CSA MAPP) and Deciding Together: A Program To Prepare Families For Fostering or Adoption On An Individual Basis* DSS also offers an Advanced Seminar called MAPP Unite.

This seminar is a forum for leaders to share activities, receive train-the-trainer information, discuss how MAPP fits in with MRS and have the opportunity to network with other MAPP leaders. Another promising approach is the new pre-service curriculum for therapeutic foster parents, *Becoming a Therapeutic Foster Parent: A Pre-Service*. Foster parents will learn the role of the therapeutic foster parent, safety planning, and the use of effective parenting tools to enhance cooperation. This curriculum will give therapeutic foster parents insights into the backgrounds, behaviors, and treatment options for children in their care while helping them have a realistic picture of foster parenting children with exceptional needs. We believe that this curriculum will help increase placement stability and will help decrease repeat maltreatment.

The Division contracts with Independent Living Resources (ILR) to deliver training to the foster and adoptive parents of adolescents. ILR has developed a three-day residency program for foster and adoptive parents, *Helping Youth Reach Self-Sufficiency*. This training is designed to develop a core group of foster parents who will provide continuing education and training to local foster parent associations on assisting foster youth to reach self-sufficiency. ILR offers *Real World Event Instructional Event* for foster parents, residential providers, social workers, and others interested in conducting regional Real World Youth Events which focus on hands-on experiences at making real life choices.

The Division financially supports the North Carolina Foster and Adoptive Parent Association in holding its annual foster parent conference. Held in November of each year, the conference attracts over 300 foster and adoptive parents. Foster and adoptive parents join with each other, Division and County staff to share resources and support. There is a collaborative effort to involve parents, staff, and youth in the delivery of workshops and activities. This conference is well attended and consistently receives outstanding evaluations. In addition, MAPP-GPS Training for foster and adoptive applicants is being conducted on Native American reservations to help recruit parents for Native American children.

Despite the numerous training opportunities that are available, the findings of a survey of foster parents reported in the Statewide Assessment suggest that there is room for improvement in this arena. Of the foster parents surveyed, 82.8 percent reported receiving training that enhances their skills and abilities to cope as a foster parent. However, 60.3 percent felt that they were informed about all agency policies and procedures that relate to their role as a foster parent, and 51.6 percent agreed that they received evaluation and feedback regarding their role as a foster parent.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was the topic of discussion in 18 interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. Stakeholders confirmed that all foster parents receive MAPP training prior to a child being placed in their homes. They noted that relative caregivers also attend MAPP training. Stakeholders reported that foster parents are trained in the procedures of Shared Parenting. In addition, if a child has specialized needs, foster parents can receive one-on-one training to help them meet the unique needs of a child. This type of training is done most often in cases involving medically fragile children.

Stakeholders noted that foster parents are required to complete 20 hours of additional training every 2 years (10 hours a year). However, stakeholders also noted that sometimes this is difficult because DSS will not pay for child care while the foster parents attend the training. Although on-line training is available, a few stakeholders indicated that it is only provided in English. It was noted that some foster parents for whom English is a second language are able to speak English fairly fluently, but do not read it.

Some stakeholders suggested that the most effective training for foster parents with regard to preparing them to be foster parents takes place at the foster parent association meetings and the training opportunities that are available at the meetings. Some key concerns of foster parents, such as how to handle the challenging situations they face from the abused and neglected children they foster, especially those who have been sexually abused, are more likely to be addressed in the association meetings than in the MAPP training.

Stakeholders also noted that the DSS Independent Living coordinators provide training for foster parents on helping youth reach self-sufficiency. Stakeholders in Mecklenburg County reported that the local teenagers who are in foster care are now involved in the MAPP training.

Stakeholders in Nash County noted that foster parents in that county are very positive about both the MAPP training and the ongoing training. They noted that ongoing training is developed in response to requests from the foster parents. Stakeholders in this county reported that there is no county-level foster parents association. According to Nash County stakeholders, the county pays for child care so that foster parents can attend training, and foster parents are notified of the multiple training opportunities available.

V. SERVICE ARRAY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		**Substantial Conformity**	
Rating	1	**2 X**	3	4

STATUS OF SERVICE ARRAY

North Carolina is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Service Array. The State was in substantial conformity with this systemic factor in the 2001 CFSR. The following items were rated as a Strength in the 2001 CFSR, but as an Area Needing Improvement in the 2007 CFSR.

- Item 35, pertaining to the adequacy of the service array.

- Item 36, pertaining to the availability of services in all jurisdictions.

The findings with regard to the specific items assessed for this factor and the reasons for the ratings are presented below.

Item 35. The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency.

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Item 35 is rated as a Area Needing Improvement. Although the State has a broad array of services in place, both the Statewide Assessment and the on-site review identify gaps and insufficient resources to address important needs, such as substance abuse treatment, domestic violence, and independent living services. Stakeholders in all sites noted concerns regarding the State's system reform for mental health services, which they believe creates difficulties in locating and accessing appropriate mental health services. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, the North Carolina CFSR results indicate that counties have an appropriate array of services and are working at the local level with mental and physical health providers, and other community service providers to assess and meet the needs of families. The Statewide Assessment also identifies the following services as being an integral part of the service array in the State:

- Independent living services—LINKS.
- Services for young adults after they have aged out of foster care, including financial assistance for housing, education, employment and other supports that are indicated as needed by the individual young adult.
- Intensive Family Preservation program offered through the Division's Community-Based Programs Team
- Non-Intensive Family Preservation Services also offered through the Community-Based Programs Team.
- The Family Reunification Services program, which has served 468 families through 24 FRS programs across 41 counties since 1999.

According to the Statewide Assessment, State Collaborative stakeholders expressed concern regarding insufficient resources to address domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues. A promising approach to meeting unmet domestic violence needs is a regional model being led by the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services, NCACDSS. The collaborative model is hoping to build capacity in rural counties lacking resources.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic of discussion in 44 stakeholder interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. Information from stakeholder interviews is consistent with information provided in the Statewide Assessment. Stakeholders generally suggested that there is a wide array of services in the State and identified family preservation services, post adoption services, services met through the Systems of Care initiative, Family Net services, a variety of parenting education services, homemaker services, shelters for women and children, domestic violence services, drug courts, and a variety of services available to older children through LINKS and an leadership program called SAYSO. Several stakeholders praised the availability of drug courts in some communities. Stakeholders also indicated that there were sufficient outpatient substance abuse treatment services, but questioned the availability of inpatient treatment for substance abuse. Access to substance abuse treatment services for adults was noted to be a particular challenge by Catawba County stakeholders.

Stakeholders across all counties were in agreement that the largest service gap in the State pertained to mental health services. They attributed this to the restructuring of the mental health system, which they believe has resulted in increasing the difficulty of accessing mental health services, and increasing concerns in the community about the general quality of the services. This was noted to be a problem for the State in general, and not just for children and families in contact with the child welfare system, although this population was affected by the problem. One example provided was that in one county, there used to be counseling available for perpetrators in domestic violence situations. However, since the restructuring of the mental health system, that service is no longer available to the families served by the agency because domestic violence services are now linked to mental health and must go through the same triage system as other types of services.

Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that although the county is generally "resource rich," since the restructuring of the mental health system in the State, the agency is finding it difficult to access mental health services for children and parents. This includes psychological evaluations, placements for children with high level mental health needs, inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment services, and placements for children who could "step down" to less restrictive settings. As one stakeholder noted, the new mental health plan has limited the capacity of the county to better serve children. However, some Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that a Systems of Care grant received in 2005 has worked to enhance community services, including mental health services.

Nash County stakeholders also expressed concern about the lack of mental health services that has resulted from the restructuring of the mental health system. They noted that the mental health service umbrella that used to exist before Mental Health reform, is now fractured and spread among at least 18 providers. Psychiatric services are no longer locally available and workers must drive their clients an hour away to access mental health services. Stakeholders reported that the new mental health services are not a system of care approach, but a provider-driven approach. Stakeholders also reported that a QA assessment done by the local mental health agency indicated that 80 percent of families needing emergency response actually receive help. It was noted that with the restructuring of the system, the LME program went from 200 staff to 20. Now the LME manages access to services, but does not provide them. Stakeholders in Nash County said that the agency caseworkers make every effort to ensure that the children and families get the mental health services that they need, but it has become much more difficult since the reform. Nash County

stakeholders also noted that when it became clear in Nash County that mental health service restructuring was going to significantly erode or eliminate domestic violence services, the local agency director gathered together a community work group that ultimately was responsible for the creation of a new domestic violence shelter program for men, women, and children.

Catawba County stakeholders had mixed opinions regarding the availability of mental health services. Although one stakeholder indicated that child welfare-involved families receive the mental health services that they need through Family Net, which is incorporated in the child welfare agency, other stakeholders expressed concern about the ability of Family Net to meet the mental health needs of families consistently and adequately.

Another service gap identified by many stakeholders pertained to independent living services. Although there was a lot of praise among stakeholders for the LINKS program, Catawba and Mecklenburg County stakeholders generally expressed the opinion that the availability of services was not sufficient to meet the need. Several Catawba County stakeholders questioned the accessibility of independent living services, noting that for many of these services, the youth has to go out of the county. Stakeholders in Catawba County also noted that there is a lot of concern in the county about children aging out of the system who are unprepared for independent living. Some stakeholders in that county said that the older children can get lost in the system and not get any services at all unless they have drug and alcohol problems. Stakeholders reported that there is an Aging Out Committee in the county with multiple organizations represented, and they are trying to find funding sources and agencies to administer services for these young people. In addition, stakeholders reported that most youth in the county are in group homes, but that they do not like being in group homes and report much more positive experiences when they are in foster homes. However, stakeholders noted that it is difficult to find foster homes in the county that will take adolescents.

Mecklenburg County stakeholders also suggested that the funding for independent living services is not sufficient to meet the need and that a big concern in their community also is children aging out of the foster care system without preparation for independent living. According to Mecklenburg County stakeholders, there are only two independent living services staff who are responsible for 700 young people eligible for the independent living services. As a result, not all of the youth get the independent living services that they need. It was suggested that the LINKS service are good, but that many caseworkers are not aware of all that is offered through LINKS. However, it also was noted that all contract providers have independent living services clauses in their contracts that are monitored. Also, there is an apartment program in the county for youth from 18 to 21.

Nash County stakeholders did not identify independent living services as a gap in their locality.

Item 36. The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State's CFSP.

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Item 36 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because both the Statewide Assessment and on-site review identified ongoing challenges regarding accessibility of some services, including services for independent living, mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Some sites noted waiting lists for services that created accessibility issues. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR. However, because the systemic factor was rated as being in substantial conformity, it was not necessary for the State to address this item in its Program Improvement Plan.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, LINKS services are available throughout the State; depending on the county size, there may or may not be group work that occurs with youth. North Carolina also recognized that domestic violence and substance abuse were challenging issues for counties and developed policies and training in consultation with various stakeholders. The North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services is working to build capacity throughout the state in the area of domestic violence service provision.

The Statewide Assessment also identified the following community-based programs as available in many areas of the State:

- Intensive Family Preservation services are available in all 100 counties. In SFY 2005, 27 IFPS programs served families in 69 counties.
- Non-intensive Family Preservation programs are available in a limited number of counties. In SFY 2005, 9 programs served families in 8 counties.
- Family Reunification programs are available Statewide. In SFY 2005, 19 programs served families in 36 counties.
- In SFY 2005, 44 family resource centers provided services in their communities. Four Adoption Promotion and Support programs, and six respite programs were available to serve foster and adoptive families throughout the State.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic of discussion in 25 interviews. Catawba County stakeholders reported that waiting lists for services were sometimes an issue in their locality, particularly with regard to family preservation services. They also noted that some services were missing, such as placements for children with behavioral issues and sex offender services. Although some stakeholders said that because the county is so large, one barrier to accessing services is transportation, others reported that transportation is provided as a service by the child welfare agency for all Medicaid recipients and that agency caseworkers often will transport biological parents to access services. In addition, service providers have made efforts to locate their services in sites that are accessible by public transportation. Stakeholders also noted that Family Net provides services to children in the schools and will meet with parents in the evenings.

Mecklenburg County stakeholders had differing perspectives with regard to service availability. Some stakeholders suggested that all critical services are available throughout the county. However, other stakeholders reported that services are not readily available when needed, and that children in custody have better access to services than children who remain in their homes. It was noted that

sometimes a judge will put a child into YFS custody to increase the child's access to services. Key services that were reported to either have waiting lists or to be difficult to access were mental health, child care, dental care, and domestic violence.

Nash County stakeholders indicated that, in addition to access to mental health services, the biggest barrier to accessing services is transportation. They noted that most services are in Nashville (North Carolina), but most people live in Rocky Mount, and there is no bus service between the two locations. Nash County stakeholders also expressed concern about the lack of a visitation site in the county. They also reported that there are some barriers to accessing services due to the overload on caseworkers, who work evening hours to accommodate parent's schedules and who attempt to meet transportation needs. One stakeholder reported that a caseworker recently drove a mother in one of her cases home from jail because there was no other way for the woman to get home.

Item 37. The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency.

__X__ Strength ____Area Needing Improvement

Item 37 is rated as a Strength because the State **and local agencies** have mechanisms in place, such as flexible funding, that facilitate individualization of services. The majority of stakeholders interviewed agreed that the State makes concerted efforts to ensure that services are individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families being served by the agency. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, since the 2001 Federal CFSR, North Carolina has moved from a deficit-based model of child welfare service delivery to a strengths-based, outcome-focused model. The shared decision making and accountability that arises from this model lend themselves to individualizing services to meet the unique needs of children and families. In addition, North Carolina's Systems of Care grant stresses that all families are unique and all have strengths.

The Statewide Assessment reports that one of the ways that DSS is attempting to individualize services is by providing cultural competency training to help staff meet the needs of the State's Latino/Hispanic and Native American populations, as well as smaller, more localized populations of Hmongs and Montanyards. The State's policy is that every effort is made to respect the family's culture. In 2006, a cross-agency cultural competency training was developed and piloted. Family input shaped the development of the curriculum. Feedback from the training was positive and plans are to continue this training. This has been important because North Carolina's Latino/Hispanic population is growing, and some counties experience difficulty accessing interpreter services with this population. DSS has made forms available in Spanish on the agency website. The Statewide Assessment notes that service delivery to Native American families occurs predominantly in four counties in the Western Region of North Carolina. These counties meet regularly with Tribal representatives. Recruitment of Native American and African American foster and adoptive parents is a deliberate strategy in North Carolina.

The Statewide Assessment indicates that North Carolina's community-based programs are tailored to meet individual families' needs. For example, key elements in the program design of Intensive Family Preservation Services include the use of home-based services where at least half of the face-to-face contact occurs in the family's home or community; focus on promoting family competence, building on the family's strengths; culturally competent services demonstrating understanding and respect for cultural and ethnic diversity; therapeutic and concrete services; round the clock access to family preservation caseworkers; caseloads no greater than four families at any given time, and specially trained and supported family preservation caseworkers. Similarly, Family Resource Centers offer a range of services designed to meet the needs of individual communities, such as parenting education classes, parent support groups, tutoring, lending libraries, and health education and services.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, members of the State Collaborative told DSS that the child and family teams are increasing the individualizing of services, and also recommended that the collaborative work more closely and share resources to ensure that children and families have access to services such as mental health/substance abuse assessment and treatment, domestic violence treatment for batterers, a broad array of foster care services, and post adoption services.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite CFSR, this item was a topic of discussion in 23 interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. There was general consensus among stakeholders at the State level and in all locations that the State has the capacity to individualize services to meet the unique needs of children and families and that the agency makes concerted efforts to ensure that services are individualized. One key to the individualization of services is the availability of flexible funds. These may include funds from the county, and funds from private sources at the local level. Catawba County stakeholders reported that they have a college scholarship fund that uses private dollars that they can access for children in foster care. There also is a committee that reviews requests for flexible funds and that committee was described as being "very generous" in meeting the specific needs of families. Mecklenburg County stakeholders also reported that dollars from the county allow for greater individualization of services, as does the System of Care grant.

Nash County stakeholders reported that although the county is rural and not "resource rich," they make up for it by being creative and resourceful. They noted that even in that county, the local government is willing to pay for services to indigent families that the State does not fund, including special camps for children. Nash County stakeholders reported that the LINKS program in that county is particularly creative with regard to individualizing services. They connect every youth who will be aging out of the system with five adults in the community in order to ensure that someone is there for the youth to go to when they need help or to reach out to the youth. Stakeholders noted that youth in that county have very positive views of the transitional planning/LINKS program and are very positive about their contacts with the agency.

VI. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2	3	**4X**

STATUS OF AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

North Carolina is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community. The State actively seeks ongoing consultation in developing and updating the Child and Family Services Plan, and has an established mechanism in place to coordinate services among federal and federally-assisted programs. The State was found to be in substantial conformity with this systemic factor it its 2001 CFSR. Findings with regard to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 38. In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP.

__X___ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 38 is rated as a Strength because the State engages in ongoing consultation to develop and update the Child and Family Services Plan through the State Collaborative for Children and Families. This item also was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the Division is committed to collaborating with internal and external stakeholders. There is a formal collaborative group – the State Collaborative for Children and Families – that is co-chaired by a parent and a professional and is attended by major child-serving agencies in North Carolina. DSS also holds meetings outside the Collaborative's existing schedule to ensure that there is adequate time to gather information and that there is comprehensive representation. DSS has reached out to the following groups of stakeholders: courts, tribes, youth, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, county partners and legislators.

With regard to the courts, the Statewide Assessment notes that North Carolina engages in regular contact with judicial stakeholders and that the Court Improvement Project Committee is facilitated by the Administrative Office of the Courts and is composed of legal practitioners, advocates, and representatives from the public. Although DSS participates in this improvement project and receives

feedback on improving the child welfare legal system, the results of a survey of legal stakeholders suggest that there are continuing concerns about the court-agency relationship. As an example, only 26.6 percent of survey respondents agreed that the agency and court meet regularly to discuss mutual concerns.

The North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs connects community agencies with governing council of Federal and State recognized tribes. Tribal collaboration to improve outcomes for tribal children is of particular concern, and the Division has designated a contact person to focus on this effort. Efforts to solicit feedback from all State-recognized tribes in North Carolina continues. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is located in Western NC, in Swain, Jackson, Haywood and Cherokee counties. The county DSS agencies have an open working relationship with the tribe. The Chief continues to be satisfied with the services provided to the Tribe by these county departments. The four DSS agencies work closely with the Cherokee Center for Family Services, Family Support Services Division in providing those services. A Memorandum of Agreement, which will shape their work together, has been drafted and is awaiting approval of the Tribal Council. Another multi-disciplinary group that meets on tribal issues is comprised of the four county DSS agencies, tribal law enforcement and attorneys, the FBI, and the US Attorneys office. This group meets regularly to discuss egregious child welfare cases in order to prevent these cases from experiencing unnecessary delays. These meeting have led to criminal charges in many cases. This group also discusses any system issues that may be preventing cases from resolution. The Cherokee Center for Family Services, Family Support Services Division, is a contractor with the Division in providing family preservation services on tribal property. The local staff position funded through this contract provides services to families where there is some danger of out-of-home placement or the family is experiencing functional challenges in the home or community. The Division staff assigned to this contract provides programmatic and technical assistance to the Tribe.

Stakeholder Interview Information

During the onsite review, this item was a topic in 26 interviews, many of which involved multiple participants. Stakeholders noted that there is a State collaborative for children and families that the State uses to obtain feedback and make decisions regarding policy and practice and that the agency is a member of the State collaborative that includes a diverse group of community providers and all internal divisions. Stakeholders noted that members of the State collaborative have been asked to be part of the general planning process and the CFSR preparation. They work on the State Plan and the IV-B plan and get regular updates from the DSS representative. There also are county-level councils and collaboratives that inform county planning, policy and practice. Stakeholders reported that the Cherokee Tribe, which is a member of the collaborative, does not regularly participate because of travel distances, but that the Tribe does receive a copy of the IV-B plan and is provided opportunity for input.

Item 39. The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered pursuant to the CFSP.

__X___ Strength ____Area Needing Improvement

Item 39 is rated as a Strength because the State consults with the Collaborative for Children and Families to update the Child and Family Service Plan annually and submit the annual reports of progress and services. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR. However, because the overall systemic factor was found to be in substantial conformity, the State was not required to address this item in its PIP.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, the Division actively engages stakeholders on a regular basis through the State Collaborative for Children and Families. Since the PIP, and particularly during the past year, quarterly reports to the Collaborative regarding issues of stakeholders' choosing are prepared. Regular outreach to solicit feedback for continuous improvement occurs through meetings with the LINKS groups (independent living services), foster and adoptive parent association, county DSS agencies, Administrative Office of the Courts, tribal representatives, university partners, and others.

The Statewide Assessment reports that a draft APSR is shared with the State Collaborative and other identified key stakeholders, and an opportunity for feedback is provided. Supplemental meetings of the State Collaborative are held in a central location of NC in order to facilitate access of all members of the collaborative.

Item 40. The State's services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population.

_X__ Strength _____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 40 is rated as a Strength because the State has mechanisms in place to ensure coordination of services and benefits. The State has established a Child and Family Leadership Council with Secretary-level representation from the major child and family-serving agencies. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's first CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information
According to the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina's State Collaborative for Children and Families facilitates the coordination of services to children and families through routine scheduled meetings which afford all child-serving agencies the opportunity to share and solicit information. A Division-level internal work group was formed with representatives from Medicaid, Child Support, Child Welfare and Economic Services – including Food Assistance and Work First to improve communication and collaboration. System of Care and the provision of child and family teams are impacting service coordination in a positive way. Families and children are being provided with services earlier in the life of the case. Governor Michael Easley's Child and Family Support Team Initiative uses a school nurse and social worker team to provide coordinated service delivery in 21 school systems in NC. DSS provided funding for facilitators to support the Initiative and enhance the effectiveness of child and family team meetings.

The Statewide Assessment reports that since the last Federal CFSR, North Carolina has undergone major changes in its mental health system. **Some** county DSS agencies are now the providers of behavioral health services.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders generally agreed that agency services are coordinated with the schools and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. They also noted that Medicaid and the agency have worked together to ensure that there are no disruptions of services when problems occur. They also noted that the courts and the agency work together, but that there is a need for a monthly meeting between these two programs.

Stakeholders reported that the Governor initiated the Child and Family Support team initiative (in education). The focus is to assist children at-risk of academic failure and out-of-home placement by strengthening screening and assessment. Funding was awarded in 2005 to 21 Local Education Areas (LEAs) for schools to hire nurses and social workers for the Child and Family Support teams. The program was designed by a multi-disciplinary team of DSS, mental health, Department of Public Instruction, and public health. Duke University is conducting an evaluation of the Child and Family Teams project.

The Governor's Office also facilitated formation of the Child and Family Leadership Council. It includes members of the Governor's Office and all secretary-level personnel, such as the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Secretary of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The Governor's budget also includes funding to expand new District Court judges and the family court program, and continued funding for Drug Treatment Court positions.

Stakeholders at the local level reported extensive coordination of services, particularly with the schools. Mecklenburg County stakeholders noted that the Systems of Care Grant has promoted extensive collaboration and discussion across agencies that did not occur in the past, particularly with regard to DSS, Department of Juvenile Justice, and Department of Mental Health. As one Mecklenburg County stakeholder noted, "Collaboration is at an all time high."

VII. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		**Substantial Conformity**	
Rating	1	2	**3 X**	4

STATUS OF FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

North Carolina is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention. During the first CFSR, North Carolina also was found to be in substantial conformity with this factor. Findings with regard to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 41. The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and child care institutions which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards.

__X__ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 41 is rated as a Strength because the State has established and implemented clear standards for licensing foster family homes and child care institutions. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's first CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

The North Carolina Division of Social Services is the Licensing Authority for family foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, child-placing agencies for foster care, child-placing agencies for adoption, maternity homes and residential child-care facilities. Minimum licensure standards are established to provide protection to four parties--the child, his/her parents, the person providing substitute care and the agency providing placement services. In order to provide foster care, operate a private agency or operate a residential child-care facility, compliance with minimum licensure standards must be demonstrated and a license issued and maintained.

As of September 30, 2006 there were 82 residential child-care facilities and 7,200 family foster homes and therapeutic foster homes licensed in North Carolina. Thirteen staff members assigned licensure responsibilities are located within one team within the DSS, Family Support and Child Welfare Services Section. Six of the staff are exclusively responsible for providing licensure services to residential child-care facilities and private, licensed child-placing agencies. These staff members receive training in licensure consultation from the National Association of Regulatory Administrators and COA. Uniform licensure standards are applied to the residential child-care facilities at initial licensure and annually thereafter. Annual onsite visits are conducted and a licensure application is completed, along with the submission of supporting documentation in order to verify compliance with applicable licensure standards. A separate file is maintained for each agency.

Two consultant positions are dedicated to providing licensure services to all 100 county departments of social services and 80 private child-placing agencies. Uniform licensure standards are applied to the 7200 foster homes by this staff at initial licensure and biennially thereafter. Supervising agencies of foster homes are responsible for the preparation of the licensing materials, recommendation for licensure and submission of the materials to the state. Foster care licensing consultants review the licensure materials using the same polices and procedures in order to verify compliance with applicable licensure standards. A separate file is established and maintained for each foster home by the Licensing Authority.

Foster home licenses are reviewed biennially by the foster care licensing consultants and residential child-care licenses are reviewed annually by licensure consultants. When licensure standards are not met, either a provisional license may be issued or adverse license actions are implemented. When a license is denied or revoked, the foster home or the residential child-care facility receives written notice of the adverse action taken. Along with the notice are information and instructions regarding the appeals process. Administrative Law judges hear appeals of adverse licensing actions.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item were in general agreement that the State has high standards for foster family homes and child care institutions. They noted that the licensing process is very tight and that it is monitored constantly. Several stakeholders reported that the State has increased the number of licensing staff. Stakeholders reported that there are two foster home licensing home consultants that review licensing documents for licensure. They received training and do all licensing requests in the same manner. In addition, there are six re-licensing consultants and they receive the same training as the two licensing consultants to ensure consistency across the State. Licensing staff meet regularly and their records are reviewed to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Stakeholders identified the following practices as ensuring that high standards are met for foster family homes and child care institutions:

- Re-licensing is done in a timely manner (every 2 years for homes).
- Background checks are both State and FBI.
- Licensing staff visit foster homes every month.
- There is a pre-placement assessment of home

Some stakeholders reported that the State has gone through a 3-year process for revising all licensing rules and they are ready to implement the revisions. During this process, they invited input from about 100 stakeholders including foster parents, licensing agencies, and placement agencies.

Mecklenburg County stakeholders suggested that they have even more stringent standards than the State does. These stakeholders reported that in their county, they have a mental health "check" to initially assess needs and match child to the foster home. They also have contracts with eight child placing agencies to license foster homes and therapeutic foster homes.

Item 42. The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or child care institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.

__X__ Strength _____Area Needing Improvement

Item 42 is rated as a Strength because the State applies its standards to all licensed or approved foster family homes or child care institutions. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment and Stakeholder Interviews
Licensing standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes. Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that for kinship homes, a waiver may apply with regard to some criteria, such as space, residence in section 8 housing, or financial requirements. Sometimes a waiver (e.g., space requirements) may be requested in order to keep siblings together. If a waiver is needed, the Director must write a letter asking for an exception, but the State licensing office can refuse the request. Stakeholders agreed that children are not placed in homes that are not licensed and that provisional licensing is not used except in a case where one of two foster parents in a family has not yet completed training.

All foster parents must complete MAPP, must be fingerprinted, must have a pre-placement assessment and fire check, and must sign a confidentiality statement. Foster parents also must receive information about State policies pertaining to prescription administration, possession of firearms, religious practices, and corporal punishment. Five references are required. Adoptive parents are not licensed but take 30 hours of MAPP training.

Item 43. The State complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances as related to licensing or approving foster care and adoptive placements and has in place a case planning process that includes provisions for addressing the safety of foster care and adoptive placements for children.

__X___Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 43 is rated as a Strength because the State requires fingerprint-based criminal records checks for all foster and adoptive homes. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2001 CFSR. However, because the systemic factor was found to be in substantial conformity, the State was not required to address the item in their PIP.

Statewide Assessment Information
North Carolina complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances related to licensing foster homes and approving adoptive placements. The statutory requirement for fingerprint-based criminal records checks for foster homes went into effect January 1, 1996. The statutory requirement for fingerprint-based criminal records checks for adoptive homes went into effect January 1, 1999 and was expanded in 2005 to include criminal record checks on all household members age 18 and above. The turnaround time for the fingerprint-based criminal records checks is approximately 16 days.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders were in agreement that the agency adheres to Federal requirements for criminal background clearances and do not license any homes without completion of this process. However, they noted that it is a very slow process. A few stakeholders reported that waivers or exceptions can be requested from some criminal offenses that occurred 10 or more years prior. Stakeholders reported that for an ICPC situation, to facilitate placement of children, the State will grant a 6-month provisional license to allow the family to work towards licensure. But background checks still must be completed.

Item 44. The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

_____ Strength _X___ Area Needing Improvement

Item 44 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Although the State works with counties to establish plans for diligent recruitment of homes, the review found that the level of recruitment and the need for homes varies across the State. A key concern was that efforts to target recruitment of homes for special populations were not consistent across sites. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, North Carolina believes that foster parents act as the best recruiters of additional foster parents and are developing a plan which will provide financial incentives to foster parents as front-line recruiters. The contract with UNC School of Social Work (Jordan Institute) is being amended to include developing a plan to recruit and retain foster parents.

Each county DSS must submit a plan that addresses efforts to diligently recruit potential foster and adoptive families that reflects the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the state for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed. These individual plans, called MEPA plans, are reviewed and approved by the Division. Adherence to the plan is monitored by the Children's Program Representatives and is a part of the CFSRs.

The Division provides support to counties in recruitment efforts in a variety of ways. Performance-based contracts are maintained with four private agencies who are expected to recruit, train and prepare adoptive parents for children with special needs who are in the legal custody of local departments of social services. Each agency has a goal of placing between 10-20 children each year while also providing post-adoption supports.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders expressed differing opinions regarding this item depending on the site. Catawba County stakeholders indicated that there is a need for more foster homes in general, as well as for homes for children of color, children with special needs, and adolescents and there was little targeted recruitment for these populations. However, stakeholders in Catawba County also noted that foster parents in that county have made concerted efforts to recruit foster parents for adolescents. Stakeholders noted that foster parents have even

brought teenagers in need of foster homes to the foster parent meetings so the families could meet them. It was noted that these teenagers were "successful in recruiting homes for themselves." Stakeholders also reported that foster parents in Catawba County also were trying to recruit Hispanic/Latino foster homes.

Nash County stakeholders were in agreement that recruitment is largely left up to foster parents, but they did not indicate a shortage of homes in their community.

Mecklenburg County stakeholders reported that there are 1,200 children in foster care in the county but only one recruiter. They suggested that the largest gaps are foster homes for siblings and for children age 8 and older. It was noted that in Mecklenburg County, they only place children in foster/adopt homes when it appears that reunification is highly unlikely so as not to compromise reunification efforts when appropriate. Mecklenburg County stakeholders also noted that foster parents in the county are highly involved in recruitment effort and serve as members of a speaker's bureau to speak about recruitment, participate in an effort to contact and involve churches in foster parent recruitment, and were interviewed by the largest, local Spanish newspaper to talk about Hispanic families becoming foster parents.

State stakeholders reported that all counties are making diligent efforts to recruit appropriate foster and adoptive homes and that each county has a recruitment program. A key focus has been on developing a program for foster parents that offers an incentive for them to recruit other foster parents. State stakeholders also reported that to assist in retaining families, they hold banquets, ceremonies, and special events to honor foster parents. They also noted that the State provides specialized conferences and training to support foster parents. The State also is working on increasing the foster care payment rate.

Item 45. The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children.

_X___ Strength ____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 45 is rated as a Strength because the State actively lists children on national and State exchanges to locate cross-jurisdictional placement resources for children. This item was rated as a Strength in North Carolina's 2001 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

North Carolina is a member of the Interstate Compact on Placement of Children which provides a framework within which member states can plan cooperatively for interstate placements to ensure that children will receive appropriate care and supervision. The Interstate Placement Statute that requires the consent of the Department of Health and Human Services prior to placement of children into or out of North Carolina, also governs the interstate placement of children. North Carolina joined the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance in October, 1999. Strengths in North Carolina include the acceptance of comparable foster parent

training requirements; removing a hurdle for families who relocate to North Carolina and are interested in fostering/adopting, and the fact that adoption assistance benefits continue when the child/family establishes residency in another state.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Some stakeholders reported that the State uses cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate placements for children. Other stakeholders reported that the primary inter-jurisdictional resource is NC Kids and that there is more placement across jurisdictions within the State than there is placements across States. However, stakeholders also noted that the ICPC process can be problematic and time consuming. Nash county stakeholders expressed concern about difficulties with placement and supervision of children across jurisdictional lines in-state.