

Limits on federal funds' use shape, hinder CPS reforms

Karina Bland

The Arizona Republic

Mar. 11, 2004 12:00 AM

Arizona's efforts to reform Child Protective Services are being hampered by how the agency can spend the money it gets for foster care from the federal government, according to a national report to be released today.

Child-welfare officials receive federal funds based on the number of children taken from homes because of abuse and neglect, and the length of time those children spend in foster care.

The money can't be spent on early-intervention or child-abuse prevention programs, impeding efforts of states like Arizona, where the goal is to keep children out of foster care and safely with their families.

"Federal funding favors placing and keeping children in foster care over providing services that might help keep children safe in their own homes," said Dave Berns, director of the Department of Economic Security, which includes CPS. "This limits our ability to prevent abuse or to intervene before the child needs to be removed."

Arizona receives \$43 million from the federal government for foster care.

Berns has requested a waiver, asking for permission to spend federal funds on early intervention and on family-support services that promote safety for families. He should hear by the end of the month.

But the competition is tough.

At least 17 states and counties have requested waivers from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but federal law allows the agency to approve just 10 each year.

States granted more flexible use of federal funding through waivers, including Illinois, Connecticut and Delaware, have reduced the number of children in foster care and the length of time that they spend in the system, according to today's report by Fostering Results, a Chicago initiative funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to improve federal funding for child welfare.

States that have been granted waivers must show how the money was spent and the results.

Before coming to DES, Berns was head of the Department of Human Services in Colorado's El Paso County, where the number of children in foster care dropped by nearly 30 percent because of intervention and prevention programs. He said Arizona has invested little in such programs.

"To a great extent, we have provided protective services only when the situation got so bad that removing the child was the only option," Berns said.

Carol Kamin, director of Phoenix's Children's Action Alliance, said, "The longer-term answer is for Congress to change the existing laws and remove the spending straitjacket so that every state has the flexibility to provide kids with the safety, stability and permanency they need."