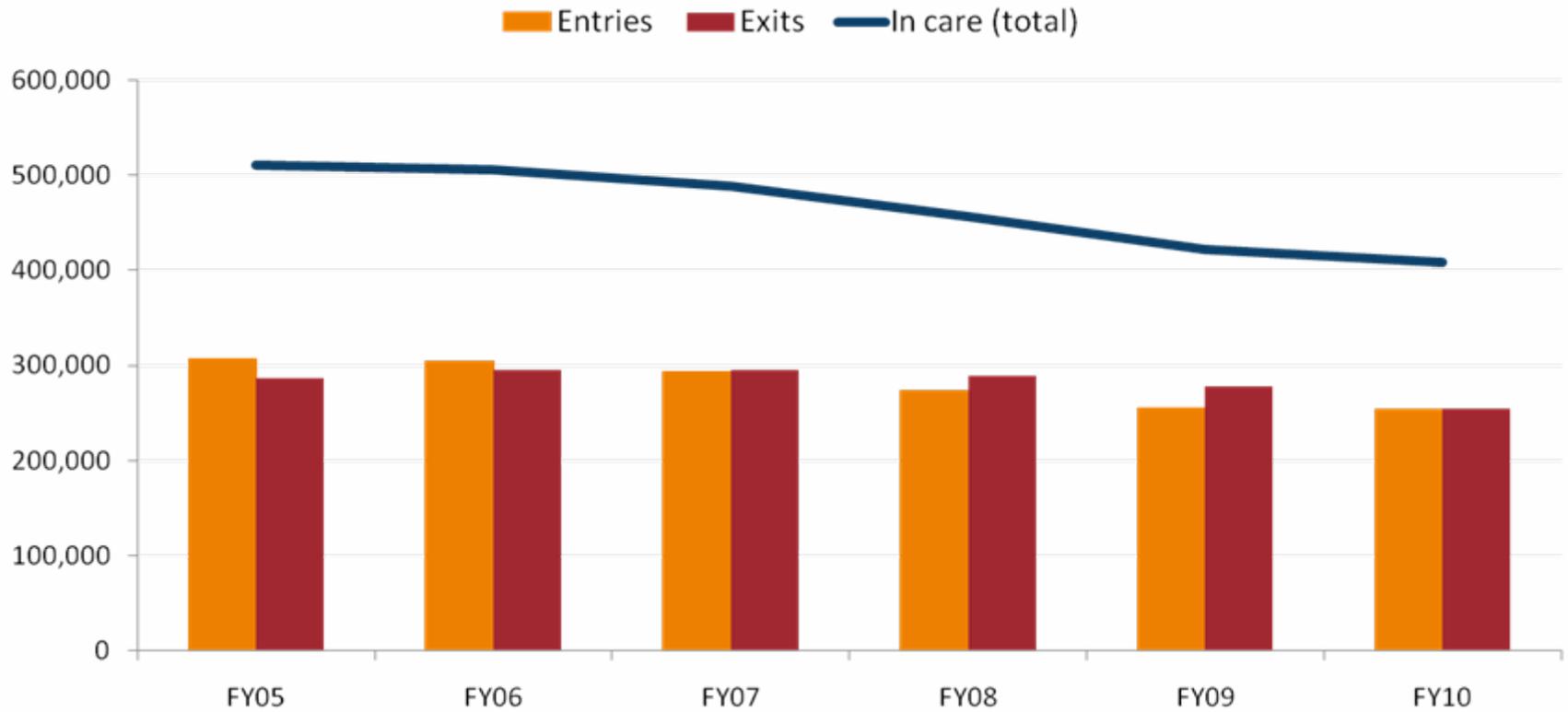


“A half-century of research demonstrates convincingly that children’s well-being builds upon meeting first their primary needs for a stable and lasting family life.”

—Mark Testa, national child welfare expert

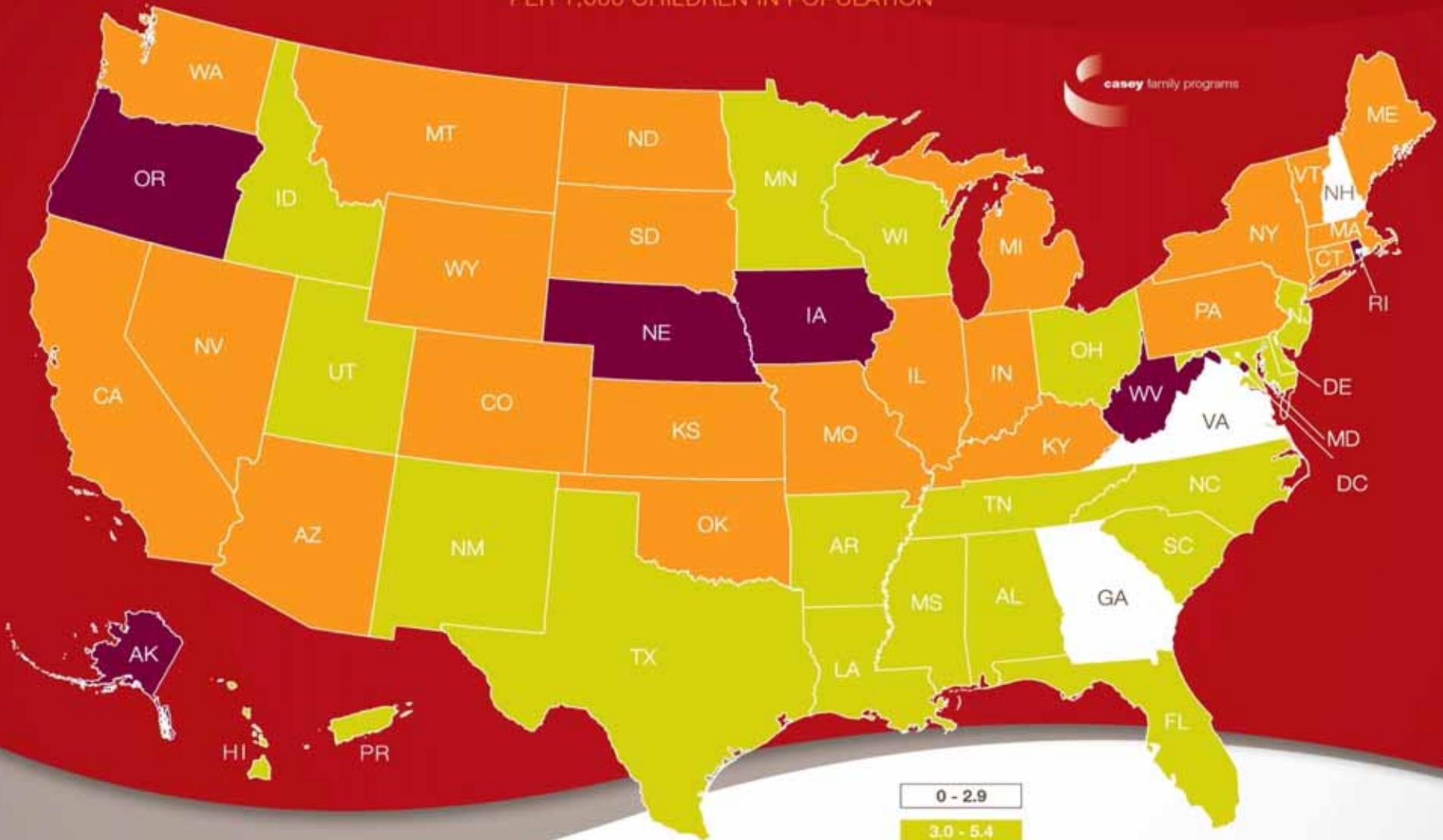
Overall Reduction:

Steady decline in the number of children in care



Rate of children in out-of-home care 2010

PER 1,000 CHILDREN IN POPULATION



0 - 2.9
3.0 - 5.4
5.5 - 9.0
9.1 and above

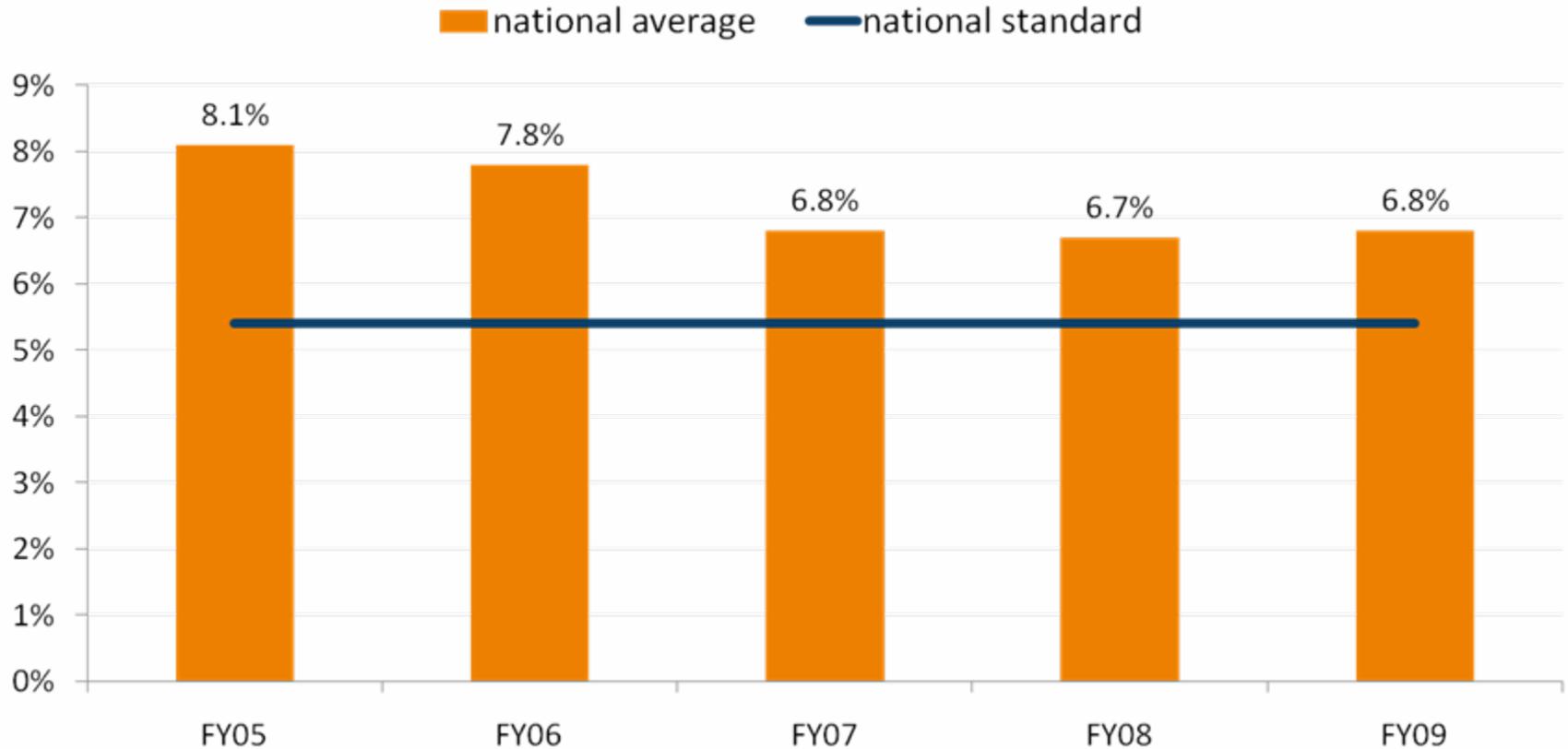
National Average: 5.4

Source: AFCARS, Claritas Population projections/estimates.

As of 9/12/2011

Safety Has Improved:

Percent of Children Experiencing Repeat Maltreatment within 6 Months



Assessing Child Safety in Oklahoma

Sue D. Steib, LCSW, Ph.D.
Senior Director



casey family programs

fostering families. fostering change®

The Review

- ❖ Conducted at the request of OKDHS leadership
- ❖ February – March, 2011
- ❖ Methodology
 - ✓ Document review
 - ✓ Staff interviews
 - 15 staff: area directors, county directors, field liaisons, training director, supervisors, caseworkers
 - Key interview questions centered on
 - Impact of “imminent safety threat” as the criterion for removal;
 - Whether the criterion comprises child safety; and
 - Strengths/concerns about safety assessment and safety planning processes.

The Findings: Document Review

✓ Generally in accord with sound practice in child protective services

■ Practice Model Guide

Strengths

- Operationalizes OKDHS practice standards;
- Defines concepts of child safety, present and imminent danger;
- Provides guidance for assessment of child safety and family functioning;
- Addresses case planning and consultation approaches, e.g., multidisciplinary teams, family team meetings, concurrent planning;
- Provides guidance for crafting effective safety plans; and
- Acknowledges that casework is complex and that caseworkers need clinical skills and to have some flexibility in practice to accommodate unique situations.

Concerns

- Lacking detailed and comprehensive discussion of application of child vulnerability in safety decision making; and
- Insufficient guidance in addressing situations with multiple risk factors that cannot be adequately served with external community resources.

The Findings: Document Review

▪ Child Protection Policy and Memoranda

Strengths

- Detailed and internally consistent;
- Calls for comprehensive investigation of reported child maltreatment;
- Explains legal threshold for removal of a child;
- Addresses identification of safety threats, incident-based fact finding, identification of maltreatment; provides a process for requesting court intervention when families refuse necessary services voluntarily; and
- Provides processes for requesting immediate custody for children in danger.

Questions/Concerns

- One section of proposed policy 340:75-13-61 used permissive language concerning interviews with parents/caregivers of children, i.e., investigations “may include interviews with the parents of the child or any other persons responsible for the health, safety, or welfare of the child.”

The Findings: Document Review

■ Assessment of Child Safety

Strengths

- Based on ACTION for Child Protection model, well recognized in U.S.;
- Generally compares well with other safety assessment tools used in CPS;
- Defines safe, unsafe, present danger, impending danger;
- Provides that children >3 years; those with diminished physical, mental capacity are to be considered more vulnerable;
- Key questions to elicit information about child safety; and
- Requires immediate plan for protection if any safety threat identified.

Questions/Concerns

- Lacking detailed and comprehensive discussion of application of child vulnerability into safety decision making;
- Needs greater clarity in guidance for identification of *present danger* as distinguished from *impending danger*;
- Protective capacities and vulnerability are to be considered only in the safety response rather than in the determination of *safe* vs. *unsafe*.

The Findings: Document Review

■ Training and Related Documents

Strengths

- Generally in accordance with sound practice; and
- Critical thinking training targets supervisors.

Questions/Concerns

- *The Safety Decision* article from ACTION for Child Protection may be confusing to staff in that it conflicts with directions in the Assessment of Child Safety concerning consideration of caregiver protective capacities in making the safety decision.
- Some materials provided for review were lacking in the level of detail normally associated with training curricula and related information (e.g., PowerPoint presentations).

The Findings: Staff Interviews

- Impact of the “imminent danger” standard on child protection practice

Strengths

- Overall, the standard has not compromised child safety;
- Change from “incidence-based” system to one focusing on actual harm and danger viewed positively;
- Current practice calls for greater attention to antecedent conditions, contributing factors, and underlying causes.

Concerns

- None voiced

The Findings: Staff Interviews

- Impact of the “imminent danger” standard on child safety
 - The new, more narrow criteria for removal was needed;
 - Former standard of a child’s “surroundings presenting a danger to his/her welfare” resulted in unnecessary removals;
 - Concerns remain about how to handle high risk cases in which children are not “unsafe” at the time of the investigation.
 - Multiple significant risk factors;
 - Community resources often are not adequate to address risks or families do not accept services voluntarily; and
 - District attorneys reluctant to file petitions when OKDHS is not requesting custody.

The Findings: Staff Interviews

- The process of assessing child safety

Strengths

- Joint protocols with law enforcement are helpful;
- 23 hour window in which child can be returned to parents without custody viewed positively;
- Assessment of Child Safety (AOC) tool comprehensive, supported by adoption of early team decision making;
- AOC supports more thorough investigations.

Concerns

- Process takes more time, even after initial learning;
- Time required for documentation exacerbated by duplication between the AOC and DA's report; and
- Some staff may lack sufficient skills to determine present, imminent danger.

The Findings: Staff Interviews

- Using safety plans to maintain children in their own homes/families

Strengths

- Children are better off if they can be kept safe in their own homes;

Concerns

- Creating and monitoring adequate safety plans is challenging in terms of time, skills, resources; and
- Staff do not always apply critical thinking necessary to create, monitor case plans effectively.

The Findings: Staff Interviews

- Staff skills, knowledge, and capacity related to safety assessment and planning

Strengths

- Training has improved; and
- Mentoring/coaching has been helpful.

Concerns

- High staff turnover means that many cases are handled by new, inexperienced caseworkers;
- Due to high turnover, supervisors often lack solid, extensive experience;
- Supervisor to caseworker ratios range from 1:5 to 1:9 with 1:7 estimated as most common;
- More skill building training is needed (older employees should also receive training); and
- Findings of reviews of child deaths, serious injuries should be used consistently to inform policy and training for all staff.

Limitations of the Review

- Focused on the specific impact of the legislative changes related to the threshold for the removal of a child and the process for assessing and ensuring child safety;
- Did not include a comprehensive review of policy or assessment of practice;
- No cases were reviewed;
- No families, stakeholders were interviewed;
- Due to time constraints, interviews were conducted only in the central office and in Areas 1 and 3.

Summary & Recommendations

The more narrow threshold for removal of children from their homes, the focus on child safety, and processes for safety assessment and planning are generally consistent with sound child protection practice.

Recommendations:

1. Consider revisions to the AOC

- a. Re-label “Safety Threats” as “Signs of Present Danger”; delink them from questions designed to assess emerging danger over 30 days;
- b. Expand discussion/guidance for application of child vulnerability in the safety decision;
- c. Consider caregiver protective capacities in determination of safety; and
- d. Review terms designating safety interventions (safety response, safety plan, and voluntary safety plan) for clarity and understanding.

Summary & Recommendations

2. Explore ways to eliminate duplication in required documentation, particularly with regard to the AOC and DA's report.
 3. Consider conducting a workload estimation analysis to inform position requests.
 4. Give priority to provision of coaching and mentoring for caseworkers and supervisors.
 - a. safety assessment and decision making
 - b. safety planning and monitoring
 - c. family engagement
 5. Establish "Practice Model" specialists in each Area for ongoing training and consultation.
- 

Summary & Recommendations

6. Develop, train, and implement guidelines and expectations for assessing and responding to risk/needs absent a safety response.
7. Consider revisions to the *Practice Model Guide* to clarify the agency's responsibility for providing services and possibly for obtaining court intervention in situations of high risk which do not, at the time of the initial assessment, meet the criteria of *unsafe*.
8. Re-evaluate the efficacy and need for court-ordered services to prevent placement and ensure that families' needs are addressed and child's safety not diminished.



casey family programs

fostering families. fostering change®

Sue D. Steib
ssteib@casey.org