

(SANCA MIS) project is to develop, implement, and maintain automated information systems that enable the Nation's abuse and neglect courts to effectively and efficiently meet the intended goals of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 (Pub. L. 105-89), which seeks to protect children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

Authority: 42 U.S.C. 670 (Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act).

Background

When ASFA was signed into law in November 1997, it was widely hailed as a milestone in the campaign to improve child welfare practice. Since then, this legislation has substantially influenced courts, child welfare agencies, and others who work to improve the lives of abused and neglected children. ASFA mandates that children's health and safety be considered paramount when courts make decisions about children's welfare. The Act also places important new limitations on the concept of reasonable efforts to return victims of child abuse and neglect to their families. Under the Act, a permanent plan must be established for foster children within 12 months of the date they enter care. In addition, States must seek the termination of parental rights (TPR) of any parent whose child has been in foster care for 15 of the preceding 22 months, except in specified circumstances.

Although they are considered by most as an important step toward improving outcomes for abused and neglected children, these reforms have significantly increased the demands on child welfare agencies and, in particular, the dependency courts that oversee them. ASFA requires new, accelerated timelines for processing abuse and neglect cases. As a result, courts must provide a greater degree of judicial oversight at a time when many are already overburdened and facing significant case backlogs. As noted in a recent study on judicial workload, ASFA has both "increased judicial responsibilities * * * in child abuse and neglect cases and decreased the acceptable period of time within which a case can be resolved" (Dobbin and Gatowski, 2001). New regulations governing mandatory TPR filings have also contributed to demands on court time. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) estimates that in March 1998 as many as one-third of foster children had been in foster care long enough to mandate the filing of TPR proceedings, which typically take

several days to conduct (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999).

ASFA's unprecedented focus on results and accountability has also increased demands made on courts and child welfare agencies. Another of the Act's key provisions requires that Federal outcome measures be developed to assess how well States meet ASFA goals and, subsequently, to inform a performance-based incentive system. These outcome measures, which are used in the new Child and Family Services Reviews, were published by HHS in the **Federal Register** (Vol. 64, No. 161) on August 20, 1999. Careful case tracking and information management is, therefore, critical for State child welfare systems. Early findings from the first 17 Child and Family Services Reviews provide preliminary evidence of the crucial role that courts play in ensuring positive outcomes for children and providing case tracking to meet ASFA guidelines. Specifically, these findings suggest that court oversight during the case review process is needed to ensure that the needs of children and families are accurately assessed and that services are mobilized to address those needs. Review findings also highlight the importance of collaborative relationships between the courts and child welfare agencies. Such relationships foster compliance not only with specific ASFA provisions but also with ASFA's intent to provide a permanent place for children who must be removed from their homes.

Unfortunately, research suggests that the systems used by dependency courts to manage information—particularly, computerized MISs—are largely undeveloped. In a recent study conducted by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) (Dobbin and Gatowski, 1998), the vast majority of court personnel described their court's MIS as "very problematic." One court improvement specialist noted that "The primary reason for untimely outcomes is bad data. * * * We can't spot check to identify problems, and we don't know how many cases are out of timeframes." In light of this identified need, OJJDP has supported several efforts that improve juvenile court functions. In 2001, OJJDP provided funds to help the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) develop and publish functional standards for juvenile court MISs. The product of this effort—Integrated Juvenile Justice Case Management Standards—provides juvenile courts with detailed guidance regarding the functions that should be included in their MISs. The core functional

standards can be viewed online at www.ncsc.dni.us/NCSC/CTP/HTDocs/Standards.htm. This effort also identifies design considerations that will improve information sharing with noncourt partners (e.g., child welfare agencies, schools, social services organizations). When completed, these design considerations will help courts communicate with key partner agencies, thereby enhancing the management of juvenile court cases.

In addition, important efforts to identify performance measures specific to the dependency court system are now underway. CIP, supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, has provided funding to the American Bar Association (ABA), NCSC, and NCJFCJ to identify standardized outcome measures for court performance. Such efforts will help track the achievements of courts and child welfare agencies (Flango, 2001).

Although this significant work continues to advance and inform State and local efforts, without funding to increase capacity or improve MIS infrastructure, many courts have found it difficult to meet the new ASFA requirements. In recognition of this need, legislators passed the Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act (the Act) (Pub. L. 106-314) in October 2000. This law authorizes an appropriation of \$25 million, to be administered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), to help courts meet ASFA requirements. However, no funds were appropriated. In fiscal year 2002, Congress earmarked \$2 million of OJJDP's appropriation to initiate the implementation of the Act. This funding provides for the development of the SANCA MIS project outlined in this solicitation.

Goal

The goal of the SANCA MIS project is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of abuse and neglect courts nationwide and to increase their ability to meet ASFA requirements.

Objectives

The SANCA MIS project seeks to develop, implement, and maintain MIS improvements by doing the following:

- Implementing national standards to measure the performance of courts responsible for processing child abuse and neglect cases.
- Implementing national functional standards for court automation.
- Establishing key data elements that address the above performance measures and functional standards as they relate to the pilot courts.