

Why GAO Did This Study

Approximately 400,000 children were living in foster care in fiscal year 2012, according to the most recent data available. HHS oversees states' implementation of federal child welfare requirements under title IV-E of the Social Security Act. In 2008, the Fostering Connections Act amended title IV-E to improve the outcomes for children in foster care, such as maintaining family and school connections. GAO was asked to review implementation of the act.

GAO examined (1) steps states have taken to implement selected provisions of the act and challenges they have faced, and (2) the extent to which HHS has monitored states' efforts. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance and surveyed 52 state child welfare agencies, achieving a 100 percent response rate. GAO also interviewed HHS officials and state and local child welfare and educational agency officials; caseworkers; court officials, and foster youth and parents in four states, selected to ensure variety of program characteristics and geographic dispersion.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HHS (1) provide guidance on how states could calculate savings resulting from changes to federal adoption assistance eligibility criteria, (2) systematically monitor states' implementation of the act, and (3) update data reporting requirements related to the act. HHS concurred with our recommendations. HHS also provided technical comments that were incorporated, as appropriate. The Department of Education had no comments.

View [GAO-14-347](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

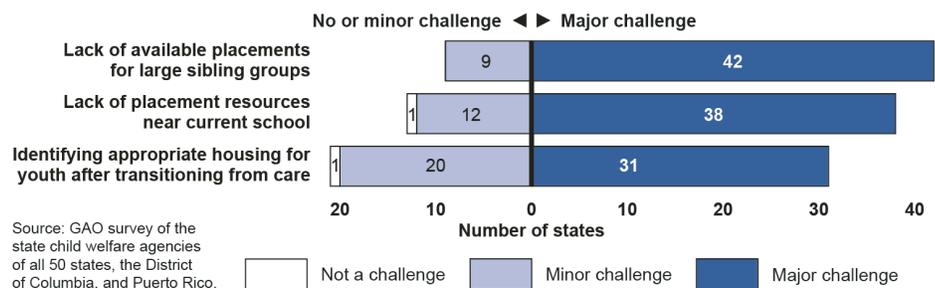
FOSTER CARE

HHS Needs to Improve Oversight of Fostering Connections Act Implementation

What GAO Found

To implement the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act), many states GAO surveyed (which included the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) reported requiring caseworkers to employ multiple practices to improve outcomes for children in foster care; however, states continue to face challenges that can undermine progress. Among the practices that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and others suggested states use, survey respondents reported requiring caseworkers to use group decision-making to maintain family connections, consult with schools, and facilitate adult connections for older youth. At the same time, a majority of surveyed states reported facing challenges, especially related to foster placements (see fig. below).

Major Challenges Reported by States in GAO Survey Regarding Foster Placements



Note: Responses do not sum to 52 if states selected "do not know/not applicable" or did not respond.

Further, the Fostering Connections Act made additional children eligible for federal adoption assistance payments thereby potentially freeing up state funds previously used for this purpose. Although states are required to spend any resulting savings on child welfare services, only 21 states reported calculating these savings for fiscal year 2012, and 20 states reported difficulties performing the calculations. HHS has not provided states guidance in this area, and without it states may continue to struggle with the calculations, leading to potential lost program funding.

HHS approved states' plans to implement the Fostering Connections Act; however, the agency has not yet monitored states' actions. HHS regulations specify that states must undergo a complete review of child welfare programs every 5 years, yet HHS's last review cycle began in 2007—using a tool developed before the act was passed. Internal control standards emphasize using timely data for effective monitoring, but data collected by HHS do not reflect the act's provisions. In March 2014, HHS announced plans to begin a review cycle in fiscal year 2015, but details about how it would address changes from the act were unavailable. Without adequate monitoring or updated data, HHS lacks information about the implementation of the act and the effectiveness of states' actions.