



Highlights of [GAO-05-787](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

To help improve foster care in the District of Columbia, the Congress provided \$14 million for fiscal year 2004 to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), the Department of Mental Health (DMH), and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG). These funds were for programs for early intervention, emergency support, and student loan repayments; computer technology upgrades, mental health services, and respite care (short-term care to provide relief for foster parents). GAO was asked to (1) assess whether the federal funds were being obligated and expended by the District government and COG consistent with provisions in the District of Columbia Appropriations Act, 2004, and the spending plans that were submitted to the Congress; (2) determine whether internal controls were operating effectively over the obligations and disbursements; and (3) assess the extent to which the District government and COG have implemented the foster care improvement programs and initiatives specified in the act and spending plans.

GAO received written comments from CFSA, DMH, and COG. The agencies generally agreed with GAO's findings and conclusions.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-787](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-787).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jeanette Franzel at (202) 512-9471 or [franzelj@gao.gov](mailto:franzelj@gao.gov).

## DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

# Federal Funds for Foster Care Improvements Used to Implement New Programs, but Challenges Remain

## What GAO Found

The District and COG have used the federal funds for foster care improvements as intended by the Congress and as described in their respective spending plans. As of March 31, 2005, about \$13.2 million of the funds provided had been obligated, about \$6.2 million of the obligated funds had been expended, and about \$722,524 remained unobligated. The unobligated funds for CFSA and DMH, in the amounts of \$588,859 and \$30,545 respectively, ceased to be available for new obligations after September 30, 2004, and should revert to the general fund of the U.S. Treasury. However, there is no such fiscal limitation on COG's use of the funds it received; thus, its unobligated \$103,120 remains available for its foster care improvement program.

Internal controls were generally operating effectively over obligations related to the federal funds at CFSA and DMH. Overall, we found that authorized personnel were processing and approving transactions and transactions were adequately supported. However, we found three instances worth discussion. These involved the need for sufficient documentation, better adherence to operating procedures and greater control over physical assets.

CFSA, DMH, and COG have implemented the programs and initiatives specified in the appropriations act and spending plans; however, it is too early to assess the effectiveness of some and challenges remain for others. Although implementation of the early intervention program was delayed, this program helped about 150 families. Also, the emergency support fund helped about 100 kinship families—relatives who provide foster care. However, it will be a challenge for CFSA to reduce the number of unlicensed kinship homes—one program goal. Although most of CFSA's unlicensed homes are not kinship homes, 265 of the 300 unlicensed homes are not in the District and officials from other jurisdictions will play a role in the licensing process. About 70 percent of CFSA's eligible caseworkers participated in the agency's student loan repayment program. This program was intended to help recruit and retain caseworkers, but CFSA's attrition rate increased from about 15 percent in 2003 to about 18 percent in 2004. CFSA developed an information technology plan that indicates the system upgrades will be completed by the end of 2005, and provided laptops to some caseworkers. DMH increased mental health services available to foster care children; however, it faces ongoing challenges in building its capacity to provide assessments and in securing long-term funding for treatment services. COG established a respite program for foster parents, but few families completed the required licensing process, and fewer placements were made than anticipated. It may be a challenge for COG to recruit, train, and license enough respite providers and convince foster parents to participate.