CHILD WELFARE

Pandemic Posed Challenges, but also Created Opportunities for Agencies to Enhance Future Operations

What GAO Found

Child welfare officials GAO interviewed in five selected states reported challenges affecting both child protective and foster care services during the pandemic in 2020-2021. Officials interviewed in all five state and 10 local child welfare agencies noted concerns about unreported child abuse and neglect, as children had less contact with mandated reporters such as teachers and doctors due to school and office closures. Officials also discussed challenges initially accessing technology and personal protective equipment needed to reduce health risks to staff and families. In addition, officials in four state and all 10 local agencies discussed delays in child welfare hearings because of court closures, which can affect when children can reunify with their parents or be adopted.

Aided by federal funding and other supports provided by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), child welfare agencies reported navigating pandemic challenges by increasing assistance to families and providing virtual services. HHS distributed CARES Act funds in amounts ranging from $15,686 to $4,690,717 to states for certain child welfare services, and provided various flexibilities to allow child welfare agencies to adapt their work. Child welfare officials in 35 of the 53 states GAO surveyed reported that they had reached out to support families who had previously been in contact with the agency to offer assistance, such as with food, diapers, and formula. Officials in GAO’s survey also reported that most agencies in their state had implemented various forms of virtual services. This included facilitating visits for children in foster care to spend time with their biological families (52 states), participating in court hearings (47 states), and providing virtual health services (35 states).

Child welfare officials in the 53 states GAO surveyed reported that they may continue providing virtual services (see figure), strengthening stakeholder partnerships, and updating disaster plans after the pandemic ends. Officials interviewed in all five state and 10 local agencies discussed benefits they observed when providing virtual services, such as increased options for children in foster care to spend time with their biological families (e.g., virtual dinners and bedtime stories). In addition, these officials discussed considerations for determining when virtual services are appropriate. Officials in all of the state and local agencies also discussed the importance of stakeholder communication and partnerships, such as with community organizations and health and education departments, which allowed them to quickly share information and serve families. Lastly, officials in all of these agencies discussed being unprepared for the pandemic. Officials in several agencies said they needed to update their disaster plans, for example, to include health safety guidance.

Virtual Services Child Welfare Agencies May Continue after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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