

Report in Brief

Date: June 2023

Report No. A-06-21-07006

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL



Why OIG Did This Audit

In response to the declaration of a public health emergency for COVID-19, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provided flexibilities to States charged with administering the Federal foster care program. These flexibilities allowed for name-based criminal records checks for prospective foster parents until fingerprint-based checks could safely be done and for videoconferencing visits to count toward the requirement that caseworker visits take place in a child's home. We performed this audit because Alaska adopted flexibilities and faced numerous challenges within its foster care program during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our objective was to determine whether Alaska complied with Federal and State foster care program requirements related to background checks and caseworker visits during the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify any vulnerabilities or gaps in policies or procedures that could place children at risk.

How OIG Did This Audit

Alaska approved the renewal of 554 foster care home licenses and licensed 269 new homes from April 1 through December 31, 2020. We randomly selected for review 50 providers, 15 renewals and 35 newly licensed homes. We reviewed documentation of background checks for foster parents and other household members, caseworker visits, and home inspections.

Alaska Experienced Challenges in Meeting Federal and State Foster Care Program Requirements During the COVID-19 Pandemic

What OIG Found

We did not identify any vulnerabilities or gaps in Alaska's policies or procedures. However, Alaska did not always comply with State and Federal requirements related to background checks and caseworker visits to foster homes during the COVID-19 pandemic, even when those requirements had been modified to provide flexibility. Specifically, Alaska did not conduct required background checks on all applicants before placing children in homes under emergency conditions and did not document all the required monthly caseworker visits. In addition, Alaska did not complete or document all home inspections as required for licensing foster homes. These issues occurred because Alaska did not consistently follow its policies and procedures for ensuring that background checks were conducted in a timely manner because high turnover limited training of its placement staff. In addition, the State agency faced challenges in conducting and documenting caseworker visits and home inspections.

What OIG Recommends and Alaska's Comments

We recommend that Alaska (1) ensure staff are adequately trained on policies and procedures to ensure required background checks are completed before placing children in foster homes under emergency conditions; (2) continue to identify ways to address the challenges related to meeting the requirements for conducting monthly caseworker visits and home inspections, including consulting with ACF; and (3) complete home inspections in accordance with requirements for the two foster homes identified by our audit as lacking completed inspections and the five foster homes requiring in-person inspections.

In written comments on our draft report, Alaska concurred with our recommendations and described actions it had taken related to conducting required caseworker visits and home inspections. Specifically, Alaska stated that caseworker visits are an existing item being addressed in the State's Child and Family Service Review Program Improvement Plan and through ongoing consultation with ACF. Alaska also said that it is partnering with Tribes to assist with completing home inspections and other licensing requirements. In addition, Alaska indicated that it had completed the home inspections that we identified as missing or needing to be conducted in person. On the basis of our review of Alaska's comments, we revised our finding on home inspections to remove two that we had previously identified as missing.