



In spring 2005, the University of New Mexico Institute for Social Research (ISR) was contracted by the New Mexico Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Network to perform an evaluation of the New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board (CRB) project.

Citizen review boards have not been extensively researched. Existing studies have found that citizen review board members rate their effectiveness as higher than the evaluation of their effectiveness by other actors in the child protective system. Additionally citizen review board members are more likely to feel that they are a necessary part of the child protective system. Also better communication between citizen review board and child protective system staff, "awareness of roles and limitations, legitimate collaboration, and realistic goals" are cited as needed for effective citizen review panels (Jones 2004). For details regarding the methodology used in this study see page 4.

Table one outlines the number of potential survey respondents initially identified, the number contacted and the number of survey respondents who completed the survey. While the response rates were lower than was hoped for, it is important to note that a 10 state citizen review panel study had a comparable response rate of 25%. In this study surveys were given in person at review panel meetings or mailed to members with self-addressed stamped envelopes. Given additional resources more followup and incentives could have led to a higher response rate. However, since the surveys were anonymous we would have not been able to contact individual survey re-

spondents to remind them they had not yet completed the survey.

**Table 1. Responses by Group**

	Number contacted	Number completed	Response rate
Judges*	20	15	75.0%
CRB	170	60	35.3%
CYFD Staff	206	52	25.2%
GALs	50	9	18.0%
CASA	340	70	20.2%
RAs	37	11	29.7%
Foster Parents**	892	99	11.1%

\* Judges were interviewed individually on the phone or in person by ISR staff.

\*\* Does not include 52 returned surveys where the survey respondent declined to participate.

The analysis below looks at the responses for all the common questions by the type of survey respondent. Given the low number of responses, the guardian ad litem (GAL) and respondent attorney (RA) respondents are not discussed.

Survey respondents' overall experience in dealing with abuse and neglect cases ranged from one month to 34 years. Their experience in their current role ranged from one month to 24 years. Given the wide range of experience both the median and the mean number of years was calculated. The mean is higher than the median indicating that it is influenced by higher values. When there is great variation in the values of a

## Key Findings

- A vast majority of survey respondents had a basic understanding of the purpose of the CRB.
- Although the 2006 survey used different questions to evaluate the CRB, like the findings of the studies done by Shaening and Associates in 1995 and 2000, the average values for most questions were near the middle value of the scale (between moderately agree and mildly agree) indicating that survey respondents did not have either strong positive or negative opinions.
- 51.3% of survey respondents had not read the CRB Annual Report and Recommendations.
- Survey respondents who have read the CRB Annual Report and Recommendations found the statistics and the county comparisons to be the useful sections.
- CYFD staff support the concept of the CRB and feel that they have enough involvement in the review process.
- A theme in the open-ended responses was the need for improved communication between the CRB, CYFD staff, foster parents, GALs, RAs, and CASA volunteers.
- A second theme in the open-ended responses concerned professionalism. Survey respondents mentioned a need for the CRB reports to be written more clearly and free of errors. Additionally there were concerns regarding the CRB's perceived level of sensitivity for respondent parents' cultural and economic circumstances.

particular variable the median statistic is best statistic to look at because it represents the middle score in the data: half the scores are greater than the median and half are less than the median. Consequently the median reflects the typical respondent's experience since it reflects the mid-value of the group's experience.

Table 2 lists respondents' overall experience in dealing with abuse and neglect cases. CRB members had the most experience with an average of 7.4 years and a median of 5.5 years. Foster parents had the least experience with an average of 3.4 years and a median of 2 years.

Generally all the groups had been dealing with abuse and neglect cases longer than they had experience in their current role. This indicates that they had been involved with abuse and neglect cases in some other capacity before being involved in their current role. CYFD staff had the most experience with an average of 6.6 years and a median of 4 years. Foster parents had essentially the same average and median experience in their current role as their experience dealing with abuse and neglect cases indicating they do not have experience outside their role as foster parents.

<b>Table 2. How long have you been dealing with children's court abuse and neglect cases (calculated in years)</b>					
	All	CRB	CYFD Staff	CASA	Foster Parents
Mean	5.2	7.4	5.8	5.3	3.4
Median	3.0	5.5	5.0	2.5	2.0

Survey respondents varied widely in the number of abuse and neglect cases they had been involved with in the last 12 months. Some survey respondents had not been involved in any cases in the last 12 months while the maximum number of cases reported was 555. CRB volunteers reported being involved in the most cases with an average of 75.5 and a median of 60. Foster parents were involved in least number of cases with an average of 2.5 and a median of 1. This is not unexpected because foster parents only have a few kids and would not have a large number of cases. CRB are expected to have the largest number of cases because their primary role is reviewing cases.

A vast majority of the survey respondents had at least a cursory understanding of purpose of the CRB (90%). Most survey respondents mentioned review of cases or to watch over CYFD as the mandate of the CRB. The most common involvement with the CRB that survey respondents reported was attending CRB reviews (79%).

### CRB Reports

Overall, 65.0% of survey respondents receive the CRB report. CYFD staff were most likely to receive the report, with 86.5% receiving the report. Foster parents were the least likely to receive the report with 42.4% receiving it.

Survey respondents were asked how much they agreed with a series of statements regarding the CRB report using the following scale:

1. Strongly agree
2. Moderately agree
3. Mildly agree
4. Mildly disagree
5. Moderately disagree
6. Strongly disagree
7. No opinion

The mean value for each question was calculated. Responses of no opinion were excluded from the calculation. Lower mean values indicate higher agreement with the statement which represents a more favorable opinion of the CRB.

Table 3 lists the mean values for each question by group. When asked if the CRB report contains information that is helpful in hearing abuse and neglect cases the average response for all survey respondents was 2.5 (between moderately agree and mildly agree). CRB members had the most favorable mean value (1.7 between strongly agree and moderately agree) while CYFD staff had the least favorable (3.9 mildly disagree). Overall CRB members consistently had a more favorable view of the CRB report on all the dimensions that were surveyed than other respondent groups. Generally, CYFD tended to have the least favorable view of the CRB report. Since CRB reviews require a time commitment for CYFD staff – giving the CRB information and attending the reviews, it makes sense that CYFD staff may have a less favorable view of report. Additionally, CRB stands to raise questions about what CYFD does which may create additional reluctance on the part of the department to see the value in the process. The difference in the perceived value of the report between the CRB members and CYFD staff should be an area of concern for the CRB. Research indicates that difficulties with child protection staff impede the effectiveness of citizen review panels. The CRB should consider ways to improve how CYFD perceives them.

Survey respondents agreed that the case background section of the report is helpful with a mean value of 2.4 (between moderately agree and mildly agree). CRB members had the most favorable mean value (1.4 between strongly agree and moderately agree) and CYFD staff had the least favorable (3.5 between mildly agree and mildly disagree). Although the overall number of responses for GAL and RA are small and we have not been commenting on their responses, it is interesting to note that GAL and RA had mean values of 4.6 and 4.8 (between mildly disagree and moderately disagree). Future research should be directed at GALs and RAs to better understand why their responses were less favorable than other survey respondent groups.

The review summary of the report was considered helpful by survey respondents (2.3 between moderately agree and mildly agree). CRB members had the most favorable mean value (1.6 between strongly agree and moderately agree) and CYFD staff had the least favorable (3.4 between mildly agree and mildly disagree).

Survey respondents agreed that the strengths/barriers section was helpful with a mean value of 2.4 (between moderately agree and mildly agree). CRB members had the most favorable mean value (1.7 between strongly agree and moderately agree) and CYFD staff had the least favorable (3.6 between mildly agree and mildly disagree).

When asked if the recommendations section of the report is helpful the average response for all survey respondents was 2.2 (between moderately agree and mildly agree). CRB members had the most favorable mean value (1.4 between strongly agree and moderately agree) while CYFD staff had the least favorable (3.5 between mildly agree and mildly disagree).

The case demographics section of the report was considered moderately to mildly helpful by survey respondents (2.2 between moderately agree and mildly agree). CRB members had the most favorable mean value (1.4 between strongly agree and moderately agree) and CYFD staff had the least favorable (3.3 between mildly agree and mildly disagree).

<b>Table 3. Sections of the CRB report and how helpful they are in hearing abuse and neglect cases</b>				
All	CRB	CYFD	CASA	FP
<b>CRB reports in general</b>				
2.5	1.7	3.9	2.1	2.0
<b>The case background section</b>				
2.4	1.4	3.5	2.1	1.9
<b>The review summary section</b>				
2.3	1.6	3.4	2.0	1.8
<b>The strengths/barriers section</b>				
2.4	1.7	3.6	2.0	1.8
<b>The recommendations section</b>				
2.2	1.4	3.5	2.1	1.6
<b>The case demographics section</b>				
2.2	1.4	3.3	1.7	1.7

**System Reports**

Survey respondents were almost equally split as to whether or not they have ever read the CRB Annual Report and Recommendations. CYFD staff were the most likely to have read it (88.6%) and foster parents were the least likely to have read it (18.2%). Table 4 lists the percentages who have read the annual report by respondent groups.

<b>Table 4. Have you ever read the New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board Annual Report and Recommendations?</b>					
	Group				Total
	CASA	CRB	CYFD	FP	
No	57.1%	23.7%	11.4%	81.8%	51.3%
Yes	42.9%	76.3%	88.6%	18.2%	48.7%

Survey respondents were asked what they find most useful about the CRB Annual Report. The most common response was the statistics (21.9%), followed by county comparisons (16.2%).

**CRB Process**

Survey respondents were asked if the notification for the CRB sessions is done in a timely fashion. The mean response was 2.6 (between moderately agree and mildly agree). Foster parents had the least favorable response with a mean of 3 (mildly agree). CRB volunteers had the most favorable response with a mean of 1.6 (between strongly agree and moderately agree).

Survey respondents were also asked if notification was complete. The mean response was 2.6 (between moderately agree and mildly agree). Foster parents had the least favorable response with a mean of 3 (mildly agree). CRB volunteers had the most favorable response with a mean of 2 (moderately agree). Table 5 lists the mean values for both CRB process questions by group.

<b>Table 5. CRB Notification Process</b>				
All	CRB	CYFD	CASA	FP
<b>Notification for CRB review sessions is complete</b>				
2.6	2.0	2.7	2.3	3.0
<b>Notification for CRB review sessions is done in a timely manner</b>				
2.6	1.6	2.9	2.4	3.0

**CYFD Staff**

An additional series of questions about CRB reviews was administered to CYFD staff. Nearly 85% of CYFD survey respondents reported they provide case information to the CRB. Over 94% had attended a review session. Fifty percent had attended a CRB in the last month. Only 9% had not attended a review in the last 6 months.

Based on the caseloads reported by CYFD social workers, the average number of cases reviewed by CRB in the past 12 months was 17.4. Survey respondents reported attending an average of 11.8 reviews. When asked the reason why they missed a session, the most common reasons were scheduling conflicts and personal reasons (sick or annual leave). Almost 14% stated they have not missed any sessions.

CYFD staff support the concept of the CRB. Survey respondents felt the CRB review allows for enough involvement from CYFD staff (mean 2.2 between moderately agree and mildly agree). Survey respondents also agreed the CRB provides an independent system for monitoring children placed in CYFD custody (mean 2.8 between moderately agree and mildly agree).

Survey respondents had less positive responses when assessing the quality of the CRB's work. When asked if the CRB provides an objective system for monitoring of children placed in the custody of CYFD the average response was 3.7 (between mildly agree and mildly disagree). CYFD staff

on average slightly disagreed that CRBs are an essential component of the abuse and neglect network and that attending reviews is worth their time. Finally, CYFD staff's average was between mildly agree and mildly disagree regarding whether the CRB does a good job reviewing cases. Table 6 lists the average values.

Table 6. CYFD Staff Responses to CRB Review Questions	
	Mean
CRB reviews allow enough involvement from CYFD staff.	2.2
Attending CRB review sessions is worth my time.	4.0
The CRB provides an independent system for the monitoring of children placed in the custody of the Children, Youth and Family Department.	2.8
The CRB provides an objective system for the monitoring of children placed in the custody of the Children, Youth and Family Department.	3.7
The CRB does a good job reviewing cases of children in state custody due to abuse and neglect.	3.5
CRBs are an essential component of the abuse and neglect network.	3.9

### Judges

Judges were interviewed using a standard interview. The average number of years hearing abuse and neglect cases was 7.8 years. The judges interviewed represented 11 of the 13 judicial districts. Some of the judges exclusively heard juvenile cases (abuse and neglect as well as delinquency) while others had broader caseloads.

Judges were asked what information they use to help them make decisions at the permanency hearing. All judges stated they consider all the information with which they are presented. Most judges mentioned the CRB report as well as the CASA report, and information provided by CYFD staff, GALs and RAs. Some judges mentioned they assess parents' compliance with their treatment plans along with the children's needs to determine if the child can safely return home. In some cases the parent may be making progress and is in compliance but they are not yet at point where the children can return home. Judges note that in some cases the parents have so much work to be done and that in some cases parents are just now starting to "work the plan" that leads them to determine a child cannot yet go home. Additionally, the availability of treatment services and how quickly parents are able to get into treatment affects how much progress they will have made before the first permanency hearing. Also, if a child has many needs it may take a parent longer before they are ready to have a child return home.

CYFD was cited by judges most frequently as the organization that they rely on most to provide them with information. CASA was the next most frequently cited organization followed by the CRB. When asked why they rely on CYFD most judges stated that CYFD has the compliance records for everything on parents (urine analysis, psychological, visitation etc...). Another reason cited was that CYFD has the most contact with the child. When judges mentioned CASA or the CRB they stated that they rely on these organizations because they are independent of CYFD. Judges who cited

CASA mentioned that CASA volunteers act on the court's behalf and report back to the court.

All judges reported that they read the CRB report. Several judges stated that they annotate the report and use it develop questions to ask at the permanency hearing.

Judges were asked to rate the recommendations, barriers, and strengths sections in terms of their relevance (having a bearing on or connection with the matter at hand) and practicality (capable of being used or put into effect; useful). The majority of judges felt that the recommendations are relevant. Some judges stated that while they do not always totally agree with the recommendations, they do offer a valuable additional view point to consider. Judges also generally agreed that the recommendations are practical. In smaller jurisdictions judges noted that sometimes the CRB makes recommendation in changes in foster parents or treatment that are not available or feasible. Additionally some judges mention that CRB may not be sensitive to "cultural and economic" factors, failing to understand why people struggle with overcoming their problems. In these cases the CRB recommendations can appear "reactionary".

Judges felt that the barriers that the CRB lists in cases are generally accurate. Judges stated that this section alerts them to challenges or issues in the case. In terms of practicality, some judges stated they view this section as informational only and that they often cannot be easily addressed by the court. Other judges stated they believe this information is more relevant to social workers.

Judges stated that the strengths offered them feedback that recognizes the positive things that are going on in the case. Several judges felt that it is important to approach abuse and neglect cases from the prospective of the strengths of the case to see how they can use the strengths to pursue the children's best interests. One judge noted that the strengths are not fully explained. For example they sometimes identify foster parents and social workers, but what about these individuals that constitutes strengths in the case?

Just over half of judges said the CRB reports occasionally contain information they were not aware of. Some examples of the types of information include incidences of sexual abuse, educational issues, harm done to children while in foster care, "something the department does not want known", or different considerations for family placement. Most judges noted that even when the report does not contain information they were not previously aware of, it often represents a slightly different perspective or nuance in the case.

Judges stated they normally receive the CRB report in a timely fashion. Judges said there are times when they receive them after the hearing. Some judges noted there is often great variation in the amount of time before the hearing and when they get the report. In some cases they get the report and a hearing is not scheduled.

Judges provided diverse answers when asked if there is another time during the timeline in abuse and neglect cases that it be more useful to receive the CRB report. Approximately 33% of the judges noted the current time was the most appropriate. The next most popular time was after ad-

judication and before judicial review. Some of the reasons noted were it would give the survey respondents an opportunity earlier on to see what others perceive as the strengths and the weaknesses in their case, it would motivate survey respondents to start their plan sooner, get earlier feedback on how “good” the plan is and see if services have been set up for the kids. One judge said it would be good to have a CRB review whenever the department is seeking to file a termination of parental rights. Other judges said they had not thought about it or were unsure.

Some judges questioned the perceived neutrality of the CRB as perceived by respondent parents and their attorneys. The reviews occur on CYFD property, a location that some parents may not feel comfortable in. Also, they may feel that there is no benefit for them to attend. They may feel that CRB will judge them for what they have done and not understand their circumstances.

The majority of judges stated they receive and read the CRB annual report. Some stated they skim the report. Those who do not read the report stated they intend to read, but given their busy schedules they do not get around to it. Most judges agreed the information in the annual report is important but saw the legislature as the intended audience for the

report. Additionally, they did not see the information as being relevant to their day-to-day activities.

The most common way that judges reported using the information in the annual report was to look at the statewide data and make comparisons about their area to the rest of the state. Judges said that they use the information to compare their county to other counties in state. Additionally, some judges said that they look at what is working and not working to assess the feasibility of other approaches. Some judges stated that they do use the information in the report when they speak to community groups or advocate for child welfare laws. It was noted that it is somewhat difficult to compare judicial districts because the report is organized by county.

## Methodology

Working with CASA and CRB staff, the following key groups involved were identified: Judges, CRB volunteers, CASA volunteers, Children, Youth, and Family Department (CYFD) staff (social workers), Foster parents, Respondent attorneys (RAs), Guardian ad litem (GALs).

To encourage open and frank responses it was decided that the survey would be anonymous. A core set of questions was established to be asked of all groups. Additional questions were designed for each group. The survey was broken down into four separate parts: General information, Court reports, Systems reports, and CRB process.

To keep cost down, it was decided that the survey would be web-based and the link for the appropriate survey would be sent to the groups via email. While an email distribution is inexpensive there are some sacrifices. The potential problems with an all email distribution that were discussed included: ISR had no quality control over the distribution of the survey, relying on others to forward the link to the appropriate people, possible inaccuracy in CRB maintained lists, not everyone has email or some may not check it regularly, and variations in computer skills, web

browsers, operating systems and method of accessing the internet could lead to technical difficulties. Ultimately, it was decided that even with these limitations an email distribution was more financially feasible than traditional mail.

Since there was no way to reach foster parents by email, ISR prepared a mailing that included a cover letter, survey and self-addressed stamped envelope for CYFD to send out to each foster parent. Additionally since judges are the nexus of the CRB review it was decided that they would be interviewed individually. We also thought that in talking with them directly we would be more likely to get information – they might not respond to a survey.

Once the survey was distributed some potential respondents encountered difficulties. Due to these technical difficulties with the web-survey CRB volunteers were mailed a copy of the survey and a self-addressed stamped envelope.