

OVERVIEW

THE AUDITOR
STATE OF HAWAII

Study of the Families Together Initiative, Final Report

Summary

In response to the Legislature's request, we described and evaluated (1) the current situation and general success of the Families Together Initiative (FTI) program, including the funding of FTI and FTI funding in comparison with the funding of other programs, and (2) any significant changes from the original program. The FTI program seeks to prevent out-of-home placement of children and to reunify families. Program services are based in the homes and provided by private vendors.

We found that FTI services are needed, but limited. The program is not designed to meet the needs of all families. The Department of Human Services (DHS) has not demonstrated that FTI can reduce the foster care caseload; no direct link between FTI and the foster care caseload has been established. We found that the funding and budgeting of FTI and other DHS social services programs are too tenuous to justify expanding FTI. We also found that the organizational structure for the program with its executive board has led to confusion and conflict. Additionally, we found that the program has only partially addressed the concerns in our interim report.

Recommendations and Responses

We recommend that the FTI program be continued, but kept in perspective with the need for other social services programs. We believe that the Legislature should not expand funding for FTI beyond its current level and that the funding for the operations of FTI's Interagency Coordination Team should be expanded *only* with additional contributions from participating agencies. DHS should present to the Legislature separate funding requests for the FTI program, the positions, and wrap around programs now included in the \$4.8 million yearly appropriation.

We recommend that FTI determine "success" using multiple outcome measures, including the safety of the child as the primary criterion. We recommend that FTI define factors for determining "imminent risk" to ensure that decisions on eligibility for FTI will be more standardized. We restate our prior recommendation that FTI evaluate and plan for wrap around services to be used in conjunction with FTI. Finally, we recommend that the FTI executive board be dissolved and the interagency coordination be outlined in a memorandum of agreement.

Both the Department of Human Services and the Families Together Initiative executive board generally agreed with our findings and recommendations. Both DHS and the FTI executive board added their own comments and points of clarification.

Marion M. Higa
State Auditor
State of Hawaii

Office of the Auditor
465 South King Street, Room 500
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813
(808) 587-0800
FAX (808) 587-0830