

§ 1355.35 Program improvement plans.

(a) *Mandatory program improvement plan.* (1) Title IV-E agencies found not to be operating in substantial conformity shall develop a program improvement plan. The program improvement plan must:

(i) Be developed jointly by title IV-E agency and Federal staff in consultation with the review team;

(ii) Identify the areas in which the title IV-E agency's program is not in substantial conformity;

(iii) Set forth the goals, the action steps required to correct each identified weakness or deficiency, and dates by which each action step is to be completed in order to improve the specific areas;

(iv) Set forth the amount of progress the statewide/Tribal data will make toward meeting the national standards;

(v) Establish benchmarks that will be used to measure the title IV-E agency's progress in implementing the program improvement plan and describe the methods that will be used to evaluate progress;

(vi) Identify how the action steps in the plan build on and make progress over prior program improvement plans;

(vii) Identify the technical assistance needs and sources of technical assistance, both Federal and non-Federal, which will be used to make the necessary improvements identified in the program improvement plan.

(2) In the event that ACF and the title IV-E agency cannot reach consensus regarding the content of a program improvement plan or the degree of program or data improvement to be achieved, ACF retains the final authority to assign the contents of the plan and/or the degree of improvement required for successful completion of the plan. Under such circumstances, ACF will render a written rationale for assigning such content or degree of improvement.

(b) *Voluntary program improvement plan.* Title IV-E agencies found to be operating in substantial conformity may voluntarily develop and implement a program improvement plan in collaboration with the ACF Regional Office, under the following circumstances:

(1) The title IV-E agency and Regional Office agree that there are areas of the title IV-E agency's child and family services programs in need of improvement which can be addressed through the development and implementation of a voluntary program improvement plan;

(2) ACF approval of the voluntary program improvement plan will not be required; and

(3) No penalty will be assessed for the title IV-E agency's failure to achieve the goals described in the voluntary program improvement plan.

(c) *Approval of program improvement plans.* (1) A title IV-E agency determined not to be in substantial conformity must submit a program improvement plan to ACF for approval within 90 calendar days from the date the title IV-E agency receives the written notification from ACF that it is not operating in substantial conformity.

(2) Any program improvement plan will be approved by ACF if it meets the provisions of paragraph (a) of this section.

(3) If the program improvement plan does not meet the provisions of paragraph (a) of this section, the title IV-E agency will have 30 calendar days from the date it receives notice from ACF that the plan has not been approved to revise and resubmit the plan for approval.

(4) If the title IV-E agency does not submit a revised program improvement plan according to the provisions of paragraph (c)(3) of this section or if the plan does not meet the provisions of paragraph (a) of this section, withholding of funds pursuant to the provisions of § 1355.36 of this part will begin.

(d) *Duration of program improvement plans.* (1) ACF retains the authority to establish time frames for the program improvement plan consistent with the seriousness and complexity of the remedies required for any areas determined not in substantial conformity, not to exceed two years.

(2) Particularly egregious areas of nonconformity impacting child safety must receive priority in both the content and time frames of the program improvement plans and must be addressed in less than two years.

(3) The Secretary may approve extensions of deadlines in a program improvement plan not to exceed one year. The circumstances under which requests for extensions will be approved are expected to be rare. The title IV-E agency must provide compelling documentation of the need for such an extension. Requests for extensions must be received by ACF at least 60 days prior to the affected completion date.

(4) Title IV-E agencies must provide quarterly status reports (unless ACF and the title IV-E agency agree to less frequent reports) to ACF. Such reports must inform ACF of progress in implementing the measures of the plan.

(e) *Evaluating program improvement plans.* Program improvement plans will be evaluated jointly by the title IV-E agency and ACF, in collaboration with other members of the review team, as described in the title IV-E agency's program improvement plan and in accordance with the following criteria:

(1) The methods and information used to measure progress must be sufficient to determine when and whether the title IV-E agency is operating in substantial conformity or has reached the negotiated standard with respect to statewide/Tribal service area data indicators that failed to meet the national standard for that indicator;

(2) The frequency of evaluating progress will be determined jointly by the title IV-E agency and Federal team members, but no less than annually. Evaluation of progress will be performed in conjunction with the annual updates of the title IV-E agency's CFSP, as described in paragraph (f) of this section;

(3) Action steps may be jointly determined by the title IV-E agency and ACF to be achieved prior to projected completion dates, and will not require any further evaluation at a later date; and

(4) The title IV-E agency and ACF may jointly renegotiate the terms and conditions of the program improvement plan as needed, provided that:

(i) The renegotiated plan is designed to correct the areas of the title IV-E agency's program determined not to be in substantial conformity and/or achieve a standard for the statewide/Tribal service area data indicators that is acceptable to ACF;

(ii) The amount of time needed to implement the provisions of the plan does not extend beyond three years from the date the original program improvement plan was approved;

(iii) The terms of the renegotiated plan are approved by ACF; and

(iv) The Secretary approves any extensions beyond the two-year limit.

(f) *Integration of program improvement plans with CFSP planning.* The elements of the program improvement plan must be incorporated into the goals and objectives of the title IV-E agency's CFSP. Progress in implementing the program improvement plan must be included in the annual reviews and progress reports related to the CFSP required in 45 CFR 1357.16.

(This requirement has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget under OMB Control Number 0970-0214. In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.) [65 FR 4080, Jan. 25, 2000, as amended at 66 FR 58675, Nov. 23, 2001; 77 FR 929, Jan. 6, 2012]