NC FAST Child Welfare Case Management Software Demonstrates Adequate Functionality but Poor Usability

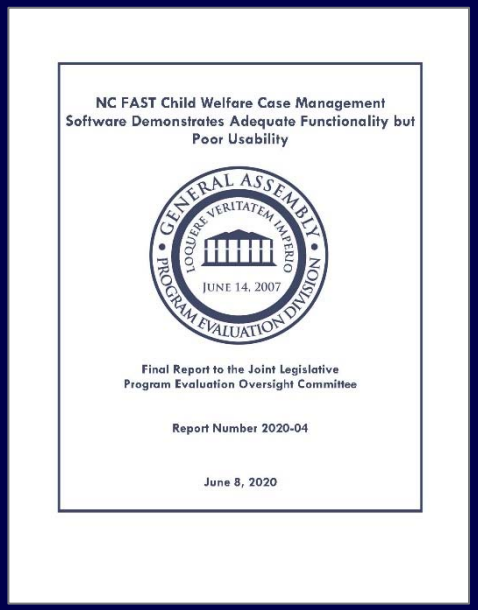
A presentation to the Joint Legislative
Program Evaluation Oversight Committee

June 8, 2020
Version Updated June 12, 2020

Sara Nienow, Principal Program Evaluator

Handouts

Full Report



NC FAST Child Welfare Case Management Software Demonstrates Adequate Functionality but Poor Usability

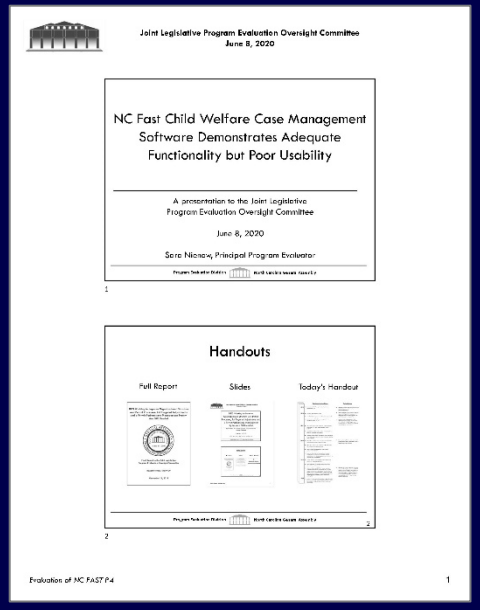
GENERAL ASSEMBLY · LOQUERE VERITATEM IMPERO · PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION · JUNE 14, 2007

Final Report to the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee

Report Number 2020-04

June 8, 2020

Slides



Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee
June 8, 2020

NC Fast Child Welfare Case Management Software Demonstrates Adequate Functionality but Poor Usability

A presentation to the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee

June 8, 2020

Sara Nienow, Principal Program Evaluator

1

Handouts

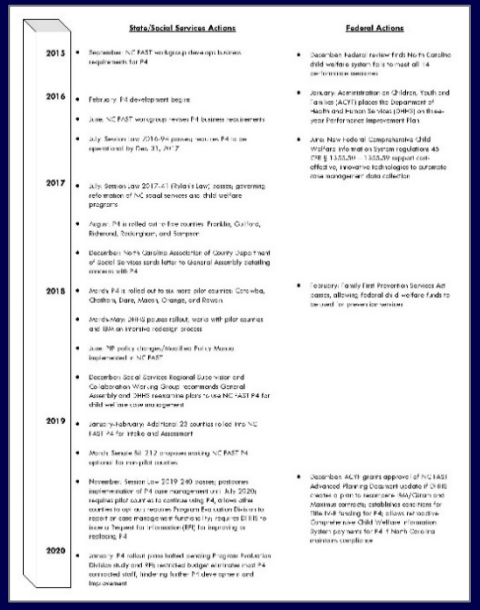
Full Report | Slides | Today's Handout

2

Evaluation of NC FAST P4

1

Today's Handout



	State/Social Services Actions	Federal Actions
2015	• September: NC FAST workgroup develops business requirements for P4	• December: Federal review finds North Carolina child welfare system fails to meet all 14 performance measures
2016	• February: P4 development begins • June: NC FAST workgroup reviews P4 business requirements • July: Session Law 2016-94 passes, requires P4 to be operational by Dec. 31, 2017	• January: Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACF) places the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) on three-year Performance Improvement Plan • June: New Federal Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System regulations 45 CFR § 1355.50 – 1355.59 support risk-differentiation, innovative technologies to automate case management data collection
2017	• July: Session Law 2017-41 (Felix's Law) passes, governing reformation of NC social services and child welfare programs • August: P4 is rolled out to five counties: Franklin, Guilford, Richmond, Rockingham, and Sampson • December: North Carolina Association of County Department of Social Services sends letter to General Assembly detailing concerns with P4	
2018	• March: P4 is rolled out to six more pilot counties: Cherokee, Chatham, Dare, Mason, Orange, and Rowan • March-May: DHHS pauses rollout, works with pilot counties and SAS on iterative redesign process • June: "IP policy changes/Modified Policy Manual implemented in NC FAST" • December: Social Services Regional Supervisor and Collaborative Working Group recommends General Assembly and DHHS examine plans to use NC FAST P4 for child welfare case management	• February: Family First Prevention Services Act passes, allowing federal child welfare funds to be used for prevention services
2019	• January-February: Additional 22 counties rolled into NC FAST P4 for Intake and Assessment • March: Senate Bill 312 proposes making NC FAST P4 optional for non-pilot counties • November: Session Law 2019-240 passes, postpones implementation of P4 case management until July 2020; requires pilot counties continue using P4, allows other counties to opt-out; requires Program Evaluation Division to report on case management functionality; requires DHHS to issue a Request for Information (RFI) for improving or replacing P4	• December: ACYF grants approval of NC FAST Advanced Planning Document update (APDU) (earlier in year to receive 90% Operations and Maintenance correctly establishes case name for Title IV-E funding for P4; allows for iterative Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System payments for P4 if North Carolina maintains compliance
2020	• January: P4 rollout pauses halfway pending Program Evaluation Division study and IRS switched budget administrator; most P4 connected staff, hindering further P4 development and improvement	

Our Charge

- Directive: Examine the child welfare case management functionality of NC FAST P4
- As part of this charge, the team also examined P4 usability and additional child welfare issues
- Team: Sara Nienow, Adora Thayer, and Natalie Garrett

Report p. 3

Overview: Highlighted Findings

1. NC FAST P4 is functional and meets most of the State's goals with the exception of management reporting and data entry

2. NC FAST P4 usability is unacceptably low, making it difficult for workers to complete tasks

3. Issues surrounding appropriations have delayed improvements to functionality; indecision about P4 will increase overall project costs and may subject the State to federal penalties

Overview: Other Findings

4. Lack of a unified child welfare practice model and resource disparities among counties hinder the State's ability to implement a child welfare case management system

5. Lack of state policy leadership and insufficient training have also stymied development and implementation of NC FAST P4

6. NC FAST's oversight structure contributed to P4 development and implementation challenges

Background

Sign at county department of social services office

NC Social Service Provision

North Carolina uses a state-supervised, county-administered system

North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology (NC FAST) system

- provides economic benefits and human services
- shares client data across nine programs and all 100 North Carolina counties

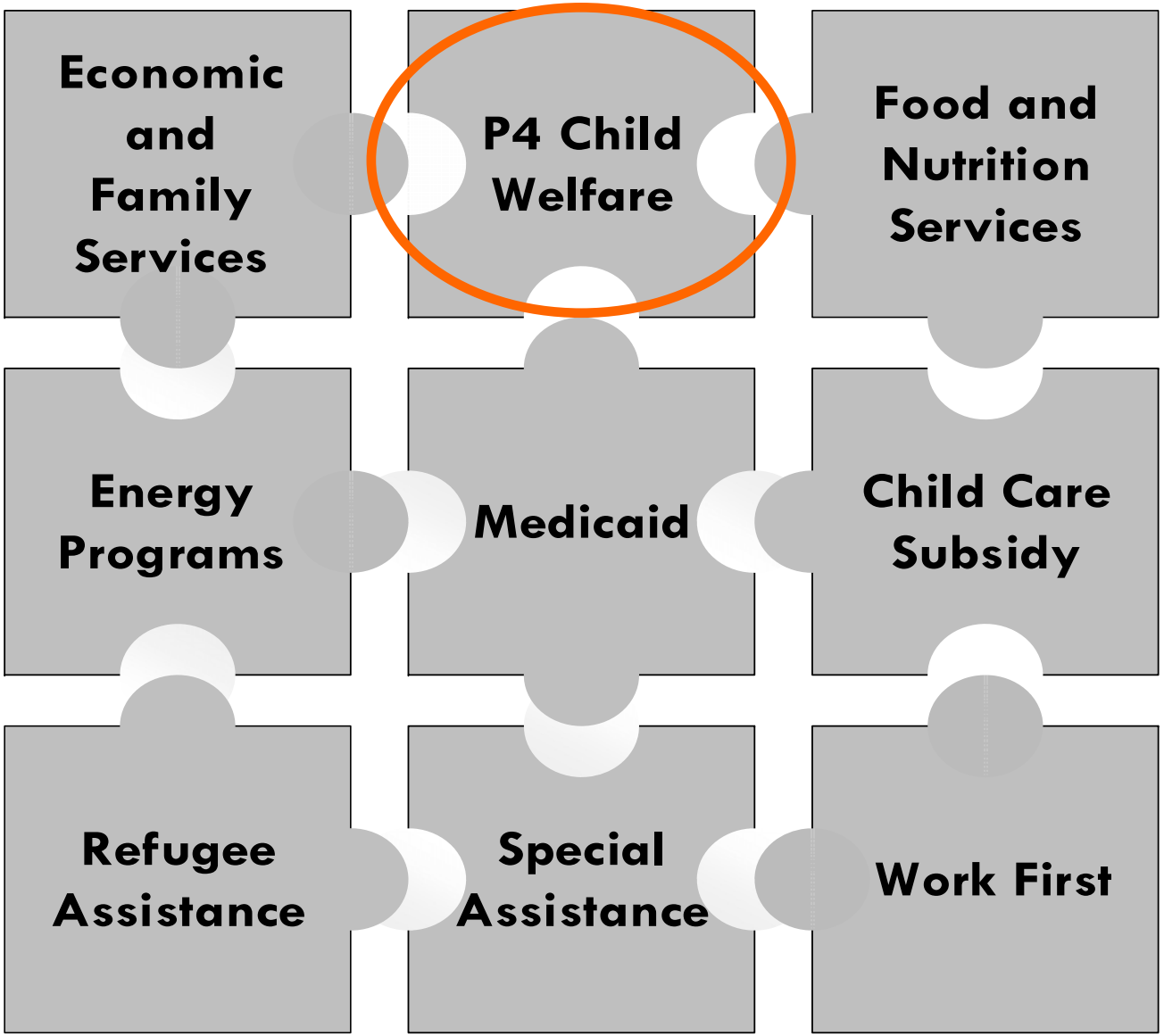
Project 4 (P4) Child Welfare Case Management Software

P4 is required to stay in compliance with federal program improvement plan

P4 is the system of record for all children and families

- intake and assessment of child maltreatment reports
- case management support for in-home and out-of-home services
- licensing of foster parents and facilities

NC FAST Modules



P4 Timeline

- In 2016, the NC FAST project team started P4 development
- P4 deployment
  - 5 pilot counties in August 2017
  - 6 additional counties in March 2018
  - 23 more counties start using intake and assessment functions in early 2019
- By November 2019, the General Assembly postponed further implementation

Current Situation

- 11 counties use the full version of P4
- 14 counties use the Intake and Assessment sections of P4
- Issues involving appropriations have limited P4 maintenance and improvements
- Due to postponed adoption, the federal government has delayed support until resolution

Functionality versus Usability

Functionality: measures if and how software can perform needed tasks

Usability: measures the ease with which the product can be used to complete required tasks

Findings

Finding 1

NC FAST P4 is functional and meets most of the State's goals for an enterprise child welfare case management system with the exception of management reporting and data entry

Report p. 26

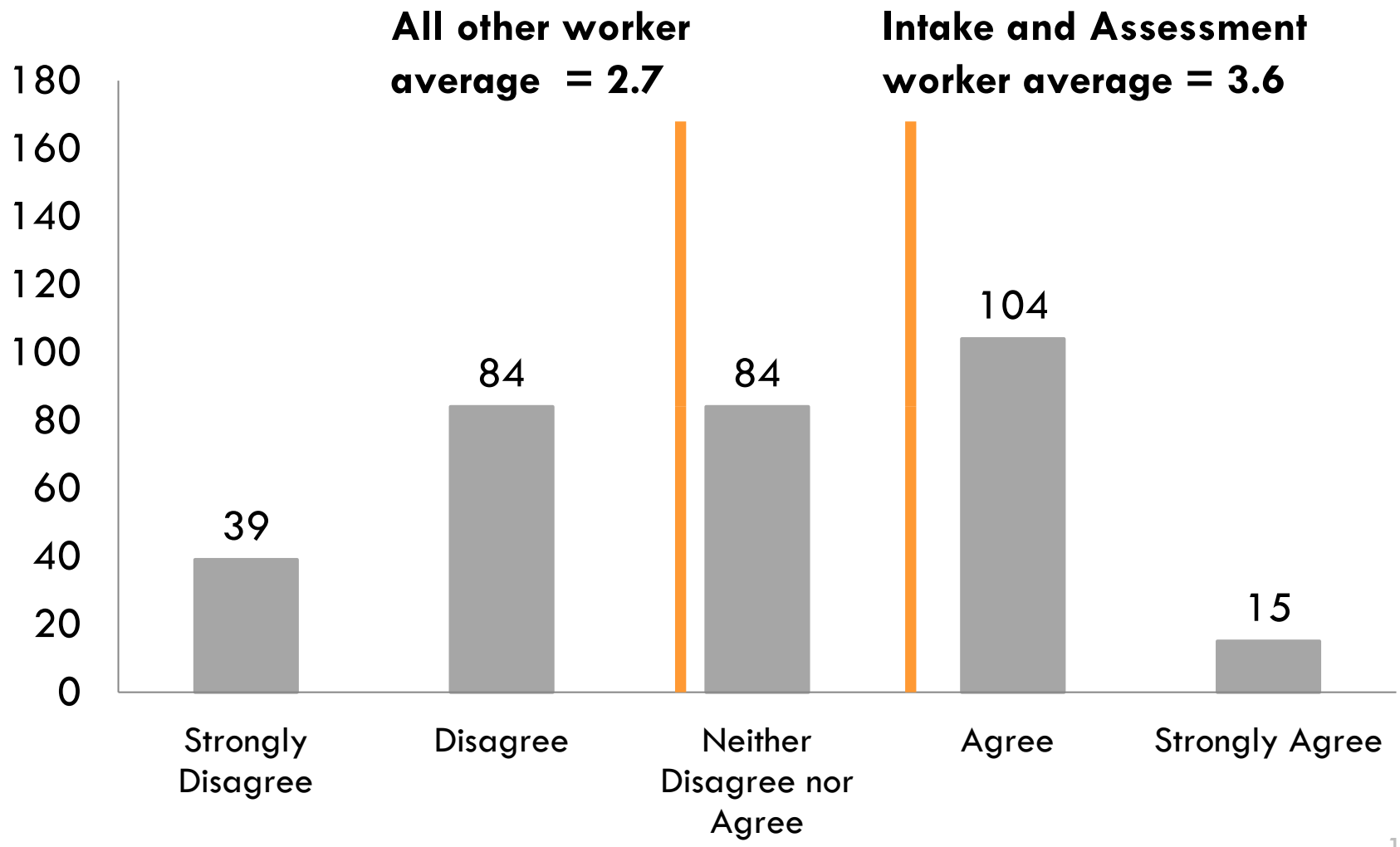
P4 Functionality Varies by Activity

86% of all business system functions (BSFs) have been deployed

- Intake and Assessment sections are more refined than Adoption or Foster Care Financials

P4 meets state goals such as information sharing, automation

P4 can perform all of the case management tasks necessary for my job



Managerial Reports and Data Entry

P4 does not have functional management reporting

- Counties are not using dashboard and managerial reports

Two-thirds of workers reported needing more time to enter data into P4

- Shortcuts to minimize data entry threaten data quality

Finding 2

NC FAST P4 usability is unacceptably low, making it difficult for workers to complete tasks

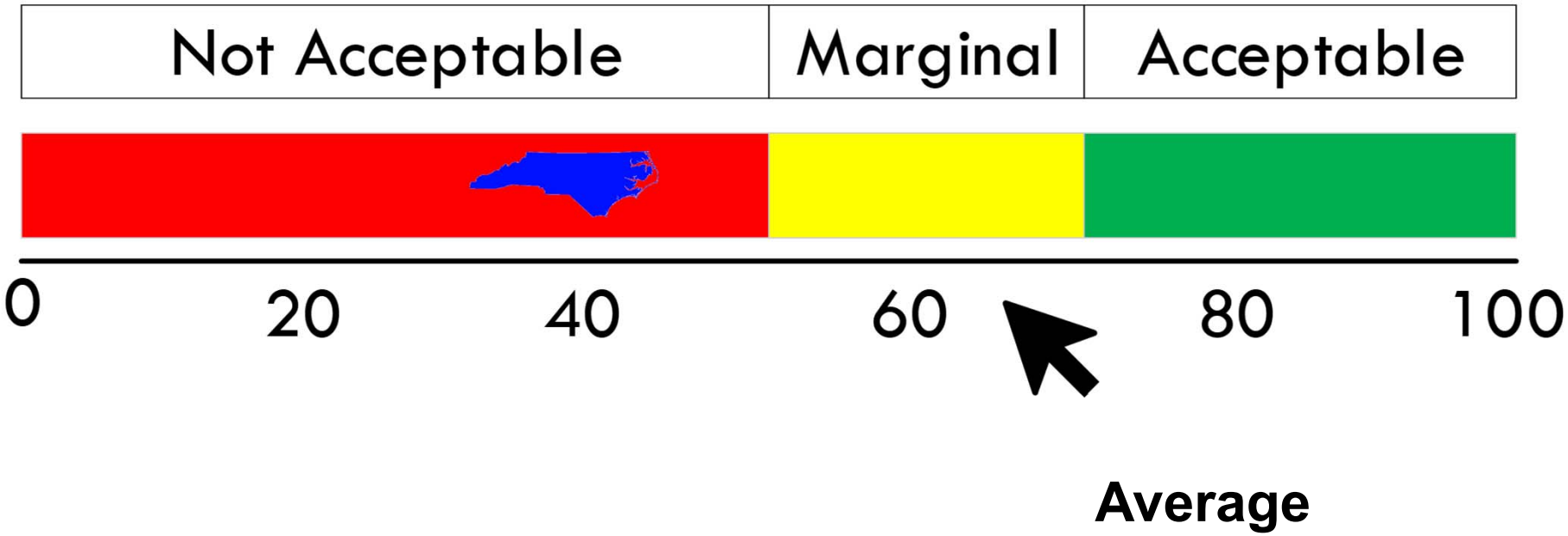
Report p. 31

System Usability Scale

Measures product usability and learnability for hardware, software, website, and computer applications

- Average score is 68
- Scores below 51 are in the lowest 15% of SUS scores

P4's System Usability Scale Score of 40 is Not Acceptable



Barriers to Usability

- Numerous minor issues burden workers
  - 13 clicks to print a form
  - inconsistent prompts for information
  - loss of attachments and dictation
  - character limits
  - inability to format documents
- Workarounds and help desk calls delay work

Finding 3

Issues surrounding appropriations have delayed improvements to functionality; indecision about NC FAST P4 will increase overall project costs and may subject the State to federal penalties

Report p. 34

Without Sufficient Appropriations, NC FAST Cannot Develop Additional Functionality

Limitations due to lack of appropriation for FY 2019–20

- eliminated contractors and staff
- fewer help desk hours and training
- counties supported but with limited improvements

Delayed P4 Implementation Can Lead to Better Product But Will Increase Project Costs

North Carolina's child welfare case management system should be both functional and usable

Additional costs will be incurred from

- rehiring and retraining lost staff
- additional software and development
- further training and technical assistance for counties

Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS)

- CCWIS is a set of optional federal standards
  - collection and sharing of information with external agencies such as courts and schools
  - more favorable reimbursement rate for P4 development
- 45 states, including North Carolina, are attempting to create CCWIS-compliant systems

CCWIS Compliance

Not using P4 could mean

- penalty for some federal funds invested in P4
- lower, non-CCWIS reimbursement rate for P4 costs incurred in 2019
- less federal funding in future

At this point, DHHS intends for P4 and future additions to be CCWIS-compliant

Finding 4

Lack of a unified child welfare practice model and resource disparities among counties hinder the State's ability to implement a child welfare case management system

Report p. 13

Inconsistent County Child Welfare Practices Hindered P4 Development

- Practice model is a stated organizational ideology for creating safe environment
- Lack of consistent practices led to county disagreement about P4 design and content for
  - intake tool
  - structured decision-making tools
  - case notes

DHHS will implement practice model by 2024

Counties Fund Child Welfare Staff

County governments control child welfare program staffing and wages

- Wage disparity leads to turnover, instability

DHHS's current strategic plan includes caseload and workload studies

- Finished by September 2021

No state mechanism to compel caseload standards

Counties Provide Child Welfare Equipment

Counties also control other vital resources

- Tablets and mobile devices could improve social work in all counties
- Currently, some assessment functions can be done remotely
- In the future, more child welfare activities may be performed and recorded remotely

Finding 5

Lack of state policy leadership and insufficient training have also stymied development and implementation of NC FAST P4

Report p. 19

State Policy Leadership

Despite federal guidance, DHHS child welfare staff were absent during development of early NC FAST modules

Further, during development of P4, DHHS child welfare policy staff did not provide active guidance to align P4 with state policy

- Child welfare staff were added to the P4 redesign in May 2018

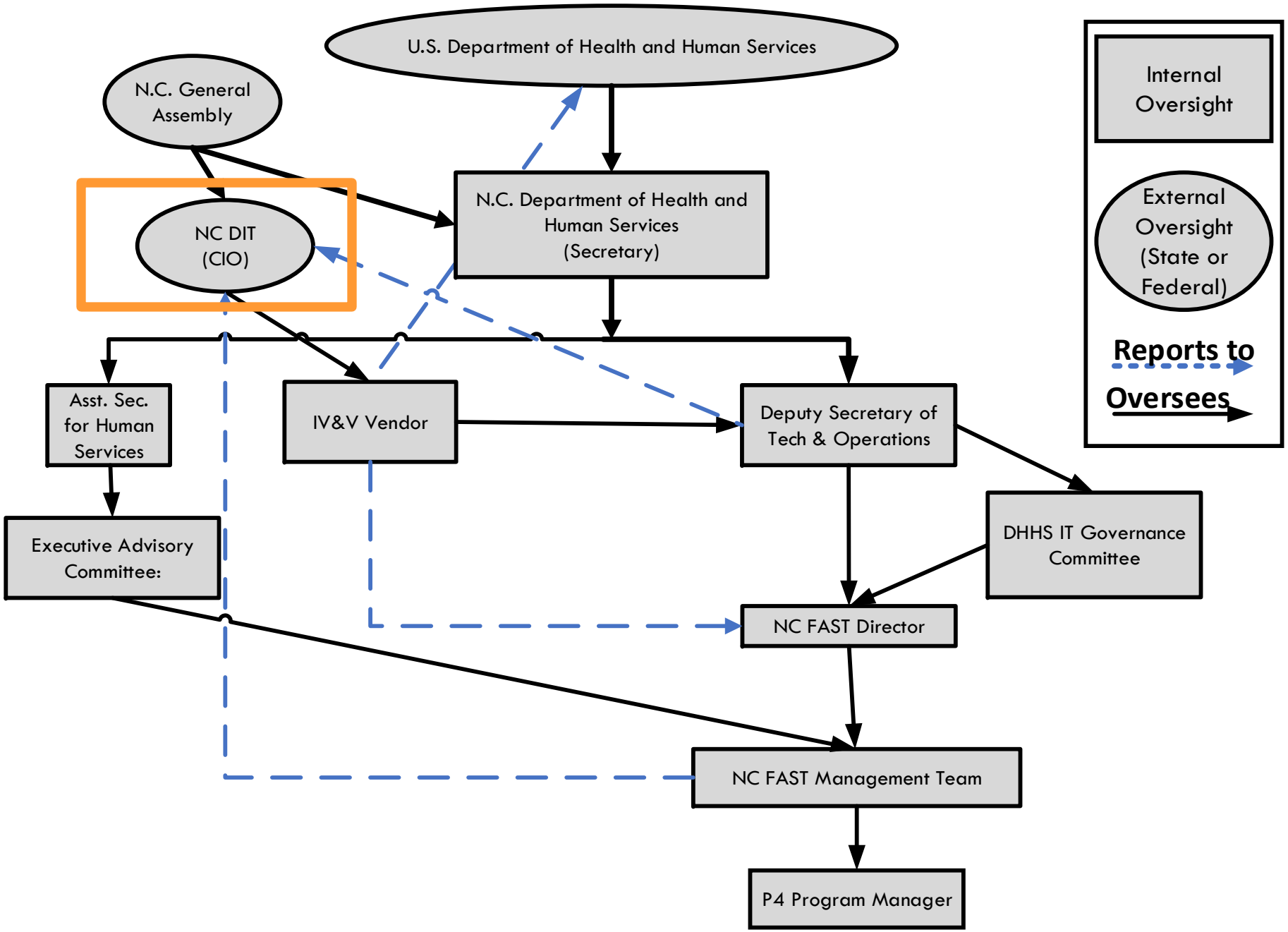
Training Challenges

- Contractor had difficulty hiring trainers with subject matter expertise
- Training presented simplistic scenarios that ignored the complexity of modern families
- Job Aids were complex and changed frequently
- Training left county staff feeling unprepared

Finding 6

NC FAST's oversight structure contributed to P4 development and implementation challenges

Report p. 21

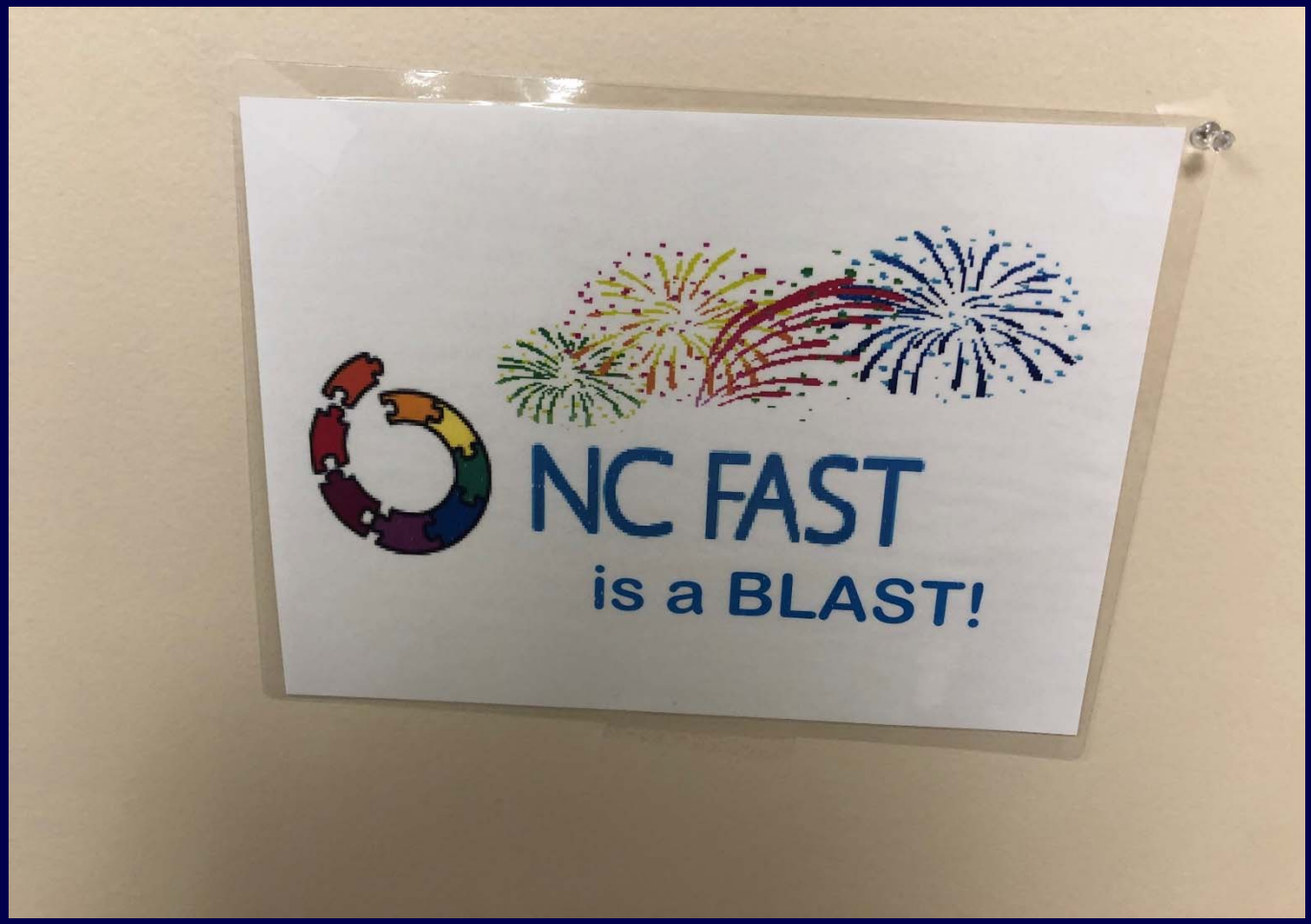

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
N.C. General Assembly
NC DIT (CIO)
N.C. Department of Health and Human Services (Secretary)
Asst. Sec. for Human Services
IV&V Vendor
Deputy Secretary of Tech & Operations
Executive Advisory Committee:
DHHS IT Governance Committee
NC FAST Director
NC FAST Management Team
P4 Program Manager
Internal Oversight
External Oversight (State or Federal)
Reports to
Oversees

Problems with P4

1. High number of defects, enhancements, and design changes
2. Inadequate staffing and subject matter experts
3. P4 code being placed into production before official approval, circumventing the standard process

Greater DIT oversight could have resolved issues sooner

Recommendations



Recommendation 1

The General Assembly should direct DHHS to prioritize improvements in the usability of NC FAST in future vendor contracts

Report p. 39

Recommendation 2

The General Assembly should direct DHHS to require a free proof of concept for any additional software purchased to reduce unnecessary risk to the State

Report p. 39

Recommendation 3

The General Assembly should direct DHHS to collaborate with a qualified organization to implement a statewide practice model and standardize child welfare business processes

Report p. 38

Recommendation 4

The General Assembly should direct DHHS to require any future training contractor to conduct culture change readiness training

Report p. 38

Recommendation 5

If the General Assembly chooses to fund NC FAST in Fiscal Year 2020–21, it should direct DIT to embed staff within the NC FAST team to provide additional state oversight and reporting on P4 challenges

Report p. 39

Summary: Highlighted Findings

1. NC FAST P4 is functional and meets most of the State's goals with the exception of management reporting and data entry

2. NC FAST P4 usability is unacceptably low, making it difficult for workers to complete tasks

3. Issues surrounding appropriations have delayed improvements to functionality; indecision about NC FAST P4 will increase overall project costs and may subject the State to federal penalties

Summary: Other Findings

4. Lack of a unified child welfare practice model and resource disparities among counties hinder the State's ability to implement a child welfare case management system

5. Lack of state policy leadership and insufficient training have also stymied development and implementation of NC FAST P4

6. NC FAST's oversight structure contributed to P4 development and implementation challenges

Summary: DHHS Recommendations

The General Assembly should direct DHHS to

- prioritize usability in future vendor contracts
- require a free proof of concept for any additional software
- collaborate with a qualified organization to develop a system of standardized child welfare business processes
- require any future training contractor to conduct culture change readiness training

Summary: DIT Recommendation

If the General Assembly chooses to fund NC FAST in Fiscal Year 2020–21, it should direct DIT to embed staff within the NC FAST team to provide additional state oversight and reporting on P4 challenges

Summary: Response

DHHS's formal response to this evaluation can be found at the end of the report

DHHS reported general agreement with PED findings

Report available online at www.ncleg.net/PED/Reports/reports.html