



# PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION

## NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

May 2020

Report No. 2020-04

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

### Summary

**IN BRIEF:** Session Law 2019-240 directed the Program Evaluation Division (PED) to examine the functionality of Project 4 (P4), the child welfare module of NC FAST. The Program Evaluation Division found that P4 is functional but scores poorly on usability. Implementation of P4 by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has been challenged by a host of issues including the absence of a state practice model, resource disparities, insufficient training, and issues surrounding appropriations.

**BACKGROUND:** For the past decade, DHHS has worked to deploy the North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology (NC FAST) system, which delivers economic benefits and human services at the county level through an integrated, cross-functional approach. The child welfare component of NC FAST is called P4 and was designed to improve how DHHS and county departments of social services complete their work and conduct oversight. P4 went live in five pilot counties in August 2017. It was not well-received by users, who found the system cumbersome. Session Law 2019-240 made P4 optional for non-pilot counties.

**Lack of a unified practice model and resource disparities between counties hinder the State's ability to implement a child welfare case management system.** Development and deployment of a statewide child welfare case management system has been impeded by the absence of a state practice model and corresponding standardized business practices. In addition, disparities between counties in terms of staff, hardware, and other goods and services have affected the State's ability to implement P4.

**Lack of state policy leadership and insufficient training have stymied P4 implementation.** The failure of child welfare staff to participate in initial NC FAST development undermined the State's ability to ensure design concepts would support child welfare functions. DHHS policy staff also did not provide active guidance on how to align the system with state policy. P4's project contractor in charge of training experienced difficulty hiring individual trainers with subject matter knowledge, which contributed to counties feeling unprepared to use P4.

**Recommendation:** The General Assembly should direct DHHS to collaborate with a qualified organization to develop a system of standardized child welfare business processes that coordinate with the State's future practice model.

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

**The oversight structure of NC FAST contributed to P4 development and implementation challenges.**

The Department of Information Technology's (DIT's) Enterprise Project Management Office oversees all state information technology projects; however, DHHS conducts most P4 management and oversight internally. DHHS employs Maximus, a third-party vendor, to perform periodic quality reviews. Although DHHS responded to some Maximus recommendations with plans and remedial actions, these responses were not always timely, nor did DHHS consistently comply with all recommendations.

**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 state oversight and reporting on P4 challenges.

**NC FAST P4 is functional, but usability is poor.** Functionality measures whether software can perform needed tasks. Ensuring a system's functionality begins with the creation of business requirements documenting business system functions that mimic some aspect of a social worker's job duties. NC FAST P4 has 4,633 distinct requirements, and as of February 2020, 86% of identified business system functions have been delivered. However, with a score of 40 on the System Usability Scale, P4 ranks in the lowest 15% of systems. In addition, dependence on workarounds and the help desk reduce employee productivity.

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

**Recommendation:** To reduce unnecessary risk to the State, the General Assembly should direct DHHS to require a free proof of concept for any additional software purchased for child welfare case management.

**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.** Issues surrounding appropriations in State Fiscal Year 2019–20 have halted most work on P4 and led to the dismissal of the majority of P4 team staff. The State may face additional software purchasing costs in addition to costs associated with further P4 development and deployment. Finally, the State may face a penalty from the federal government and a lower reimbursement rate by supplementing or replacing P4 with other software.